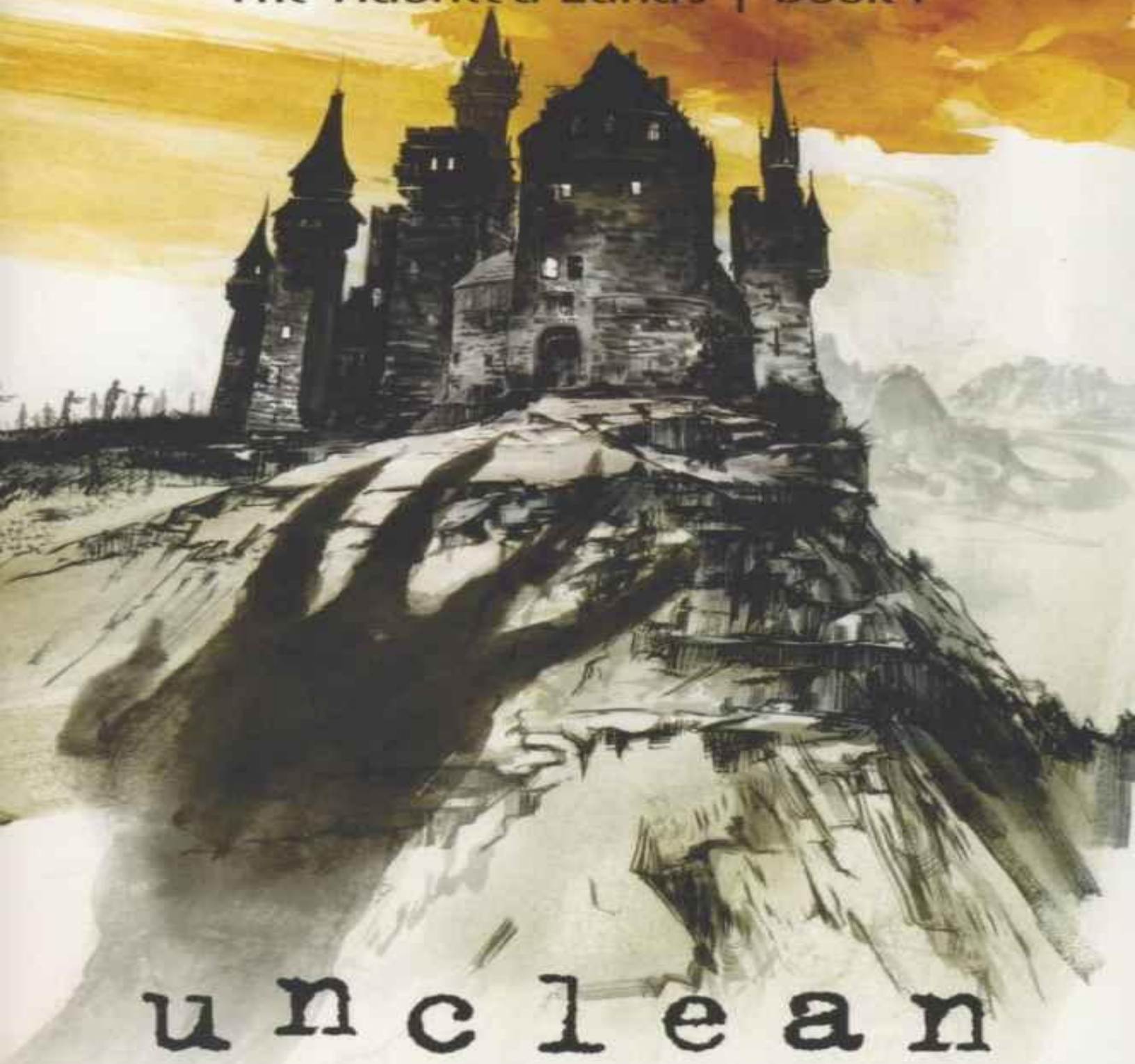


FORGOTTEN REALMS

Author of *Dissolution*

Richard Lee Byers

The Haunted Lands | Book I



unclean

## Forgotten Realms

### The Haunted Lands: Unclean

By Richard Lee Byers

#### Prologue

5 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin (1375 DR)

Like any wizard worthy of the title, Druxus Rhym could distinguish reality from dream and knew he was experiencing the latter. Thus, when people started screaming, the clamor in no way alarmed him.

It did, however, intrigue him. Perhaps an amusing spectacle lay in store. Maybe the dream even had something to teach him, some portent to reveal. Oneiromancy was a specialty of the Red Wizards of Divination, while he'd devoted the bulk of his studies to the art of Transmutation. But he was a zulkir, the head of his order and so one of the eight rulers of the land of Thay, and no one rose to such eminence without achieving mastery of many forms of magic.

He extricated himself from his tangled silk sheets and fur blanket and rose from his enormous octagonal bed with its velvet canopy and curtains. Magic had kept the air in his apartments warm just as it did in the real world, and when he murmured the proper command, it likewise lit the globular crystal lamps in their golden sconces.

The pulse of light splashed his reflection in the mirror, complete with weak chin and bulge of flab at the waistline of what was otherwise a skinny, stork-legged frame. Reflecting that it seemed unfair a fellow had to be homely even in his dreams, he ambled toward the door and the shrieking beyond. Some of the cries were taking on a choked or rasping quality.

He opened the door to behold eight sentries, four men-at-arms and four wizards, none of whom was any longer capable of guarding anything. Most had collapsed to their knees or onto their bellies, though a couple were still lurching around on their feet. All were melting, flesh, hair, clothing, and armor liquefying, blending, streaming, and

dripping down to make multicolored puddles and splatters on the floor. Their screams grew increasingly tortured then fell silent, as mouths, throats, and lungs lost definition.

Her eyes and even their sockets gone, her nose sliding down her chin like molten candle wax, one young wizard extended a buckling arm in mute appeal for succor. Despite his comprehension that none of this was real, Druxus stepped back in reflexive distaste.

Once entirely melted, the puddles that had been the guards began to steam, dispersing their substance into the empty air. At the same time, the walls and ceiling started to dribble and flow. Druxus's forehead tingled and stung, and a viscous wetness slid down over his left eye.

Dream or no, the sensation was repugnant, and he decided to end it. Exerting the trained will of a mage, he told himself to wake, and at once he was back in his bed in his still-dark chamber where, heart thumping, he lay trying to slow his panting.

Strange, he thought, that he should have such a nightmare, and stranger still that it had been so vivid as to actually unsettle him in the end. It almost inclined him to think he ought to take it seriously as a portent or even a warning, but he didn't see how it could be, because he understood the subtext: He'd been dreaming about the book.

The book was nonsense. Or to give it its due, it was a bold and brilliant exercise in arcane theory but of no practical significance whatsoever. Why, then, should it trouble his unconscious mind?

He was still pondering the matter when invisible but powerful hands clamped around his throat.

The crushing grip instantly cut off his air. At the same time, a ghastly chill burned through his body, making his muscles clench and threatening to paralyze him.

He thrust shock aside to focus his will. Reckless foes had tried to assassinate him before, and even when surprised in his bed, he was never unarmed or helpless. The rings on his

fingers, the silver-and-obsidian amulet around his neck, and the glyphs tattooed on his body were repositories of magic. He had only to concentrate and one or another of them would infuse his spindly frame with a giant's might, turn his attacker to stone, or whisk him across the realm to a place of safety. He decided on the latter course of action, and then the phantom heaved him up off the feather mattress and bashed his head against a bedpost.

The impact didn't kill him or even knock him unconscious, but it smashed his thoughts into a sort of numb, echoing confusion. The phantom ripped the talisman from around his neck then slammed his head against the obstruction once more.

Something banged. Druxus realized the door had flown open to hit the wall. Voices babbled and footsteps pounded. His guards had heard the sounds of the struggle and were rushing to save him.

Unfortunately, the phantom heard them coming as well. He threw Druxus onto the floor then rattled off an incantation.

Power crackled through the air, and a mote of light flew at the onrushing sentries. When it reached them, it boomed into a sphere of bright yellow fire, exploding with such violence as to tear some of its targets limb from burning limb.

The diversion gave Druxus a final opportunity to use his magic. He strained to focus, to command the proper tattoo to translate him through space, felt the power stir, then his assailant hit or booted him in the jaw. It jolted the stored spell out of his mental grasp.

The phantom continued to pound him until he was thoroughly dazed with agony, until he had no hope of using wizardry or doing anything else. He expected the beating to continue until he died.

After a while it stopped, and he felt a desperate pang of hope. Was it possible his assailant wasn't going to kill him after all?

"I'm sorry for this," the phantom said, his deep, cultured voice now sounding from several paces away, "but it's necessary."

He spoke the same words of power he'd employed before. Another spark flared into being then sprang at Druxus's face.

Armored from head to toe in blue-enameled plate, mounted on a hairless, misshapen, slate gray war-horse infused with the blood and ferocity of some demon-beast from the Abyss, Azhir Kren, tharchion of Gauros, watched with mingled impatience and satisfaction as the combined armies of her province and Surthay waded the river. Impatience because fording a watercourse was always tedious and in theory dangerous: a force was divided and so vulnerable. Satisfaction because the army—a force made up of humans; towering, hyena-faced gnolls; blood ores with their tusks and piggish features; scaly lizardfolk; and animated skeletons and zombies—made such a brave sight, and because she was confident they'd cross successfully.

Some might have considered her overconfident, for over the years, Thayan armies had often traversed this deep gorge with its maze of secondary canyons in order to invade Rashemen, their neighbor to the north. Thus, the Iron Lord, the witches, and their barbarous ilk surely expected another such incursion to come someday, but not this early in the year when, by rights, the spring thaws should have made the River Gauros too deep and swift to ford.

It wasn't, though. Azhir's wizards had tamed the torrent, though she didn't understand why, if they could do that much, they couldn't dry it up altogether. Still, the important thing was that the legions could cross and do so unmolested. Nobody was on the north side of the river to oppose them.

Laden like pack mules, gray-faced, empty-eyed zombies waded ashore. On the south side of the river, Homen Odesseiron, tharchion of Surthay and Azhir's co-commander,

waved a company of blood ores forward, and the officers relayed the order to their underlings. The bellowing carried easily above the murmur of the river and the babble of soldiers closer at hand and hinted at the terrifying war cries the creatures screamed in battle.

In truth, Azhir didn't particularly enjoy contemplating Homen with his wizard's robes, warrior's sword, lance, destrier, and perpetually dour, expression. She didn't dislike him personally—since they were both governors of relatively poor and sparsely settled tharchs, denied a fair portion of the immense wealth and resources of southern Thay, she actually felt a certain kinship—but it vexed her to share command with him when this venture was entirely her idea. She'd had to talk him into it, and it had literally taken years, because the zulkirs didn't know about the expedition, would have forbidden it if they had, and Homen very sensibly feared their displeasure. The mage-lords wouldn't content themselves with discharging tharchions who so exceeded their authority. They'd punish the transgressors as only Red Wizards could.

But only, she was certain, if the invasion failed. If she presented her masters with a victory over the hated barbarians, with wagon-loads of plunder and hundreds of newly captured slaves, perhaps even with Rashemen itself conquered at last, they would surely reward her initiative.

She needed Homen's warriors to ensure such a triumph, so she had to treat him as an equal for the time being. She promised herself she'd find a way to claim the bulk of the credit and the highest honors when the time came.

He looked in her direction, and she dipped the tip of her lance to signal that all was well on her side of the river. Then voices started singing, the music intricate and contrapuntal, the sound high, sweet, and eerie as it resounded from the brown stone canyon walls. Azhir cast about, seeking the source, and arrows began falling from on high, thrumming through the air and thudding into the bodies of her troops.

At last she could see some of the archers, perched on ledges high above her. Perhaps it was no great marvel that they'd managed to conceal themselves until that moment. Rashemi were little better than beasts and possessed an animal's facility for hiding in the wild, but how could they possibly have known Azhir's army would come so early in the year, let alone seek to ford the Gauros at this particular spot?

An arrow slammed into the crest of her helm, jerking her head, and she realized her questions would have to wait. For now, she had a disaster to avert. She bellowed for her troops to shoot back, though her bowmen, loosing their shafts at targets much higher up, half hidden behind makeshift ramparts of piled stone, were going to have a difficult time of it. Meanwhile, Homen sent all the Thayans still on the south shore rushing forward to ford as rapidly as they could and join the fight.

Azhir realized her wizards had yet to join the fray. A few thunderbolts, conjured devils, and blasts of blighting shadow could do wonders to scour the foe from the escarpment overhead. She cast about and saw the warlocks scurrying to form the circles they used to perform rituals in concert.

Idiocy! They didn't need to waste precious moments coordinating to evoke hailstorms and the like. They could do that working individually. She spurred her steed in front of a scrambling wizard, cutting him off from the half-formed circle he was trying to reach. He was one of the scarlet-robed elite, and ordinarily even a tharchion would be well advised to show him a certain deference, but this wasn't an ordinary situation.

"Just hit them!" she shouted, brandishing her lance at the Rashemi.

"Listen!" he replied, his eyes wide. "Don't you hear it?"

Hear what? How was she supposed to hear anything in particular above the cacophony of the battle, the drone of arrows, wounded men screaming, the Rashemi women

caterwauling, the blood ores roaring, but then she did—a rumbling, roaring, crashing noise, growing louder by the moment and sounding from the east.

She realized it wasn't just Rashemi women singing. It was Rashemi witches, and chanting together, they'd broken the enchantment that had held the Gauros in check. Now the flood was reasserting itself, and the Thayan mages believed they had to combine forces to subdue the river once again.

Azhir permitted the Red Wizard to rush onward toward his fellows. She then faced the river and screamed, "Get out of the water now! Run for whatever shore is closer! Just get out!"

As far as she could tell, no one heeded her. In all likelihood, no one could hear.

That left the wizards as the army's only hope, which, she insisted to herself, should suffice. Thayan magic was the most

potent and sophisticated in all Faerun. Rashemi witches were merely savages with a certain knack for trafficking with petty spirits of forest and field.

But however insignificant their powers, they'd already accomplished their liberation of the flood. That allowed them to harry the Thayan wizards as the latter sought to chain it anew. Emerging from their hiding places on the heights, their faces and bare limbs painted, their hair barbarously long and unbound, the witches conjured enormous hawks and clouds of stinging flies to attack the spellcasters below or made brambles burst forth from the ground to twine around them like serpents. Meanwhile, the Rashemi archers sent many of their shafts streaking at the Thayan warlocks.

It all served to hinder the Red Wizards and their ilk. Some perished or suffered incapacitating wounds. Others felt obliged to forsake their nascent ritual at least long enough to wrap themselves in protective auras of light or scorch masses of swarming insects from existence. Meanwhile, the



hiss and roar of the flood grew louder.

Crowned with driftwood and chunks of ice, the white towering wall that was the wave front seemed to burst into view all at once, as if it had leaped up from a hiding place of its own, not hurtled downstream. It was hurtling, though, so swiftly that many of the warriors likely didn't even perceive it until it swept over them, to drown and smash them and carry the corpses away.

It obliterated a significant portion of the Thayan host, split the remainder in two, and left Azhir's part trapped on the wrong side of the river, where the Rashemi were going to massacre them while their comrades watched helplessly.

A number of her wizards had manifestly made the same bleak assessment she had. Some vanished, translating themselves instantaneously through space. Others invested themselves with

the power of flight then soared into the air.

Azhir realized she had to reach one of them before they all bolted, so she could compel him to take her with him as he fled. She spurred her hell-steed toward a figure in a red robe, and an arrow punched into the beast's neck, burying itself up to the fletchings. The charger stumbled then toppled sideways.

She kicked her feet out of the stirrups and flung herself clear. She landed hard, her armor clashing, but at least her leg wasn't caught or broken beneath her mount's carcass. She dragged herself to her feet and cast about, trying to locate the Red Wizard once more.

She couldn't find him or anyone else attired in telltale crimson. In fact, now that she was no longer astride a mount, she couldn't discern much of anything. Everything was too chaotic. Panicked Thayan warriors scrambled every which way, without order or rational purpose.

She could hear, though. Somewhere close at hand, Rashemi berserkers howled like wolves, working themselves into frenzy. In a heartbeat or two, they'd burst from hiding and

throw themselves at the Thayans, completing the ruin the witches and archers had begun.

I truly am going to die here, Azhir thought. The realization frightened her, but she'd spent a lifetime denying fear and wouldn't go out a craven at the last. Promising herself she'd send at least a few Rashemi vermin to the Hells ahead of her, she pulled her sword from its scabbard.

Then the wind shrieked. Azhir could scarcely feel a breeze, but she perceived that the air must be profoundly agitated overhead, because the Rashemi arrows were veering and tumbling off course.

She caught a glimpse of the half-naked berserkers driving in on the Thayan flank. All at once, ice gathered on the ground beneath their feet and rose here and there in glittering spikes.

The Rashemi warriors slipped and fell, gashing themselves against the protrusions, which were evidently sharp as razors. More ice geysered upward from the central mass, forming itself into a crude, thick-bodied, faceless shape like a statue on which the sculptor had barely begun to work. The giant swung its hand, and the shattered bodies of two barbarians flew through the air.

Rain poured from the empty air to batter the canyon wall, and wherever it pounded one of the Rashemi, flesh blistered and smoked. The enemy made haste to shield themselves or scuttle for cover, which interrupted the witches' barrage of spells.

Then he appeared before Azhir, so suddenly she assumed he must have shifted himself through space, but without the ostentatious burst of light, crackle of power, or puff" of displaced air that often accompanied such feats. Rather it was as if she'd simply blinked, and at that precise moment, he'd stepped in front of her. Though he could no doubt appear however he liked—and gossip whispered that his true form was ghastly indeed—Szass Tarn, zulkir of Necromancy, looked as he always had whenever she'd met

him. He was tall and dark of eye, with a wispy black beard and a vermilion robe trimmed with gems and gold. He was gaunt and pale even for a Thayan aristocrat, but even so, he seemed more alive than otherwise. Only his withered hands and the hint of dry rot that occasionally wafted from his person truly attested that he was a lich, a wizard who'd achieved immortality by transforming himself into one of the undead.

She started to kneel, and he caught hold of her arm and held her up. "No time for courtesies," he said. "My magic interrupted the attack, but it will resume in a moment. Get your people moving toward the river."

She stared at him in confusion. "We don't have a way to cross."

"I'm about to remedy that."

He produced a scroll, perhaps plucking it from the empty air, though it was also conceivable that, his shriveled fingers deft as a juggler's, he'd simply drawn it from his voluminous sleeve. He unrolled the vellum, turned to face the Gauros, and spoke the trigger phrase, releasing the magic stored in the parchment.

Three arches of crimson light shimmered into being above the river, spanning it from shore to shore. Bridges, Azhir realized, he built us bridges.

She grabbed the nearest warrior, held him and shouted at him until she made him understand that a means of escape was available. Then she released him to spread the word, even as she continued to do the same.

Perhaps her efforts did a little good, but it was primarily Szass Tarn who goaded the Thayan warriors toward salvation. He multiplied himself to appear in a dozen places at once, each version bellowing to all in an amplified voice discernible even over the ambient din.

In less time than Azhir would have imagined possible, they were all scrambling for safety. The smooth, transparent curve of the bridge she chose looked as if it ought to be

slippery as glass, but in fact, the surface was sufficiently rough that she had no difficulty negotiating it.

It was only when she was on the south shore, and Szass Tam was dissolving the bridges to forestall pursuit, that she remembered that a death beneath the blades of the Rashemi would have been a merciful fate compared to what the lich was likely to do to her.

Homen Odesseiron had long ago learned that a battle doesn't end when the fighting stops. He and Azhir had to restore order to their battered and demoralized legions, make sure the healers

tended the wounded, withdraw their force to a place of greater safety, and establish a defensible encampment.

It was hectic work, but even so, Homen stole the odd moment to savor the beauty of wisps of white cloud in the bright blue sky and the towering mountainsides with their subtle striations of dun and tan and their trim of fresh spring greenery. He made time because it might well be his final opportunity to enjoy anything.

Soon enough, Szass Tarn led the two insubordinate tharchions into a tent—Homen's own green- and white-striped pavilion, as it happened, with his axe-and-boar standard planted before the entrance—to talk in private. Once inside, he kept the governors kneeling for a considerable time. The servants had spread carpets on the ground, but the exercise in humiliation made Homen's knees ache even so. Since Azhir was as old as he and wearing plate to boot, it was probably even more uncomfortable for her. He hoped so anyway.

"I confess," said Szass Tarn at last, "I don't recall the council of zulkirs ordering a raid on Rashemen. Perhaps I missed a meeting."

There was a part of Homen that wanted to shout, It was all her idea, reckless, ambitious, hatchet-faced bitch that she is. She pressured me into it. But his pride wouldn't permit him to whine like a frightened child, and it wouldn't have done

any good anyway. As governor of Surthay, he had to take responsibility for his own decisions.

"Your Omnipotence," he said, "I exceeded my authority and led my troops into a trap. I'm to blame and will accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate."

Szass Tarn smiled. "Are you sure? You've seen the kind of punishments I'm wont to concoct. Get up, both of you. Do you have anything to drink stowed in these trunks ? If so, perhaps you could pour us each a cup."

Feeling confused, Homen did as the necromancer had bade him. Szass Tarn inhaled the bouquet of the Chessentan red, swished it around, then sipped from his golden goblet with every sign of a connoisseur's appreciation, though Homen wondered if the undead were truly capable of enjoying such pleasures. Perhaps the lich simply drank—and even, on occasion, ate—to appear more normal and so put folk at ease.

"Well," said Szass Tam, "it's clear what the two of you did, but kindly explain why."

"Master," Azhir said, "with respect, surely it's plain enough. I sought to perform great deeds for Thay, to fill her coffers with plunder and extend her borders."

"And to enrich and elevate yourself in the process." Szass Tam raised a shriveled finger. "Please, don't embarrass yourself by denying it. Kept within limits, self-interest is a virtue in a tharchion." His dark eyes shifted to Homen. "I take it you share your co-commander's sentiments?"

"Yes," Homen said. "Your Omnipotence knows that in my youth, I was a Red Wizard of Evocation. I could have remained with my order and enjoyed a privileged, luxurious existence, but the warrior's life called me. I aspired to win great victories on the battlefield."

Szass Tam nodded. "Yet for all your personal prowess and all the might of Thay's legions, you rarely prevailed in a campaign of any consequence."

Homen's face grew warm with emotion. Shame, perhaps.

"That's true. Somehow, through the decades, Rashemen and Aglarond withstood us again and again, and now I'm an old man. I didn't want to go to the grave as the failed captain of a humbled realm."

"I understand." Szass Tam took another sip of wine. "But why not ask the zulkirs to authorize your expedition? We could have given you additional troops—"

"By the Black Hand!" Azhir exploded. She must have been utterly unable to contain herself to interrupt a zulkir. He arched an eyebrow, and realizing what she'd done, she blanched.

"It's all right," Szass Tam said. "Complete your thought."

"It's just—" Azhir took a breath. "Master, have I not asked for permission repeatedly over the course of the last several years, and have you not denied me every time? These days, the policy is trade"—her tone made the word an obscenity—"not war. All we want is our neighbors' gold, even though we already have plenty, even though the mountains of High Thay are full of it. I remember when we dreamed of ruling Faerun!"

"As do I," Szass Tam replied.

Homen hesitated then decided that if the lich hadn't struck Azhir dead for her outburst, he might likewise tolerate a somewhat impertinent question. "Master, pardon me if I presume, but you almost sound as if. . . you agree with us? I thought you supported peace and the trade enclaves."

Szass Tam smiled. "There are only eight zulkirs, but our politics, our gambits and maneuverings, are more intricate than any sane outsider could imagine. You should be wary of assuming that all is as it appears, but we can talk more about that later." He shifted his narrow shoulders like a laborer about to set to work. "For now, we must determine how to turn today's debacle into a splendid achievement, a deed meriting a triumphal procession as opposed to pincers and thumbscrews."

Homen reflected that it was strange. By rights, conversation

ought to produce enlightenment, but the longer the three of them talked, the more perplexed he felt. "You . . . mean to help us escape the consequences of our folly?"

"It should be easy enough," said the lich. "It's all in how one tells the story, isn't it? How about this: Because the two of you are astute commanders, with scouts and spies cunningly deployed, you discovered that a band of Rashemi intended to

invade Thay via the Gorge of Gauros. You marched out to stop them and stop them you did, albeit at a heavy cost. Let all Thay applaud your heroism."

Homen studied Szass Tam's fine-boned, intellectual features, looking for some sign that the necromancer was toying with them, proffering hope only for the amusement of snatching it away once more. As far as he could tell, the undead warlock was in earnest.

"Your Omnipotence," Homen said, "if you show us such mercy, then for the rest of our days, we will serve you above all others."

"That seems fair." Szass Tam saluted them with his cup. "To better times."

Chapter one

7-8 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

It wouldn't take long for the crew, accomplished sailors all, to moor the cog and run out the gangplank, but Bareris Anskuld was too impatient to wait. He swung his long legs over the rail, and ignoring the shout of the mariner seeking to dissuade him, he jumped for the dock.

It was a fairly long drop and he landed hard, nearly falling before he managed a staggering step to catch himself. But he didn't break anything, and at last, after six long years abroad, he was home in Bezantur once more.

He gave his traveling companions on the ship a grin and a wave. Then he was off, striding up the dock and on through the crowds beyond, picking his way through stacks and cart-loads of goods the stevedores of the busy port were loading

or unloading, sword swinging at his hip and silver-stringed yarting slung across his back.

Some folk eyed him speculatively as he tramped by, and he realized with a flicker of amusement that they took him for some manner of peculiar outlander in a desperate hurry. They had the hurry part right, but he was as Thayan as they were. It was just that during his time abroad, seeking to make his way among folk who were seldom particularly fond of his countrymen, he'd abandoned the habit of shaving the wheat blond hair from his head.

He supposed he'd have to take it up again, but not today. Today something infinitely more wonderful demanded his attention.

For all his eagerness, he stopped, stood, and waited respectfully with everyone else while a pair of Red Wizards and their attendants passed by. Then he was off again and soon left the salt-water-and-fish odor of the harbor behind. Now home smelled as he remembered it, stinking of smoke, garbage, and waste like any great city, but laced with a hint of incense, for Bezantur was Thay's "City of a Thousand Temples," and it was a rare day when the priests of one god or another didn't parade through the streets, chanting their prayers and swinging their censers.

There were no great temples where Bareris was headed. A worshiper would be lucky to happen upon a mean little shrine. He passed through a gate in the high black wall and into the squalid shantytown beyond.

He took the back-alley shortcut he'd used as a boy. It could be dangerous if a fellow looked like he had anything worth stealing, and these days, carrying an expensive musical instrument, he supposed he did. But during his travels, he'd faced foes considerably more daunting than footpads, and perhaps it showed in the way he moved. At any rate, if there were thieves lurking anywhere around, they suffered him to past unmolested.

A final turn and his destination, just one nondescript shack



in a row of equally wretched hovels, came into view. The sight froze

him in place for a heartbeat, then he sprinted up the narrow mud street and pounded on the door.

"Open up!" he shouted. "It's Bareris. I'm back!"

After a time that seemed to stretch for a day, a tenday, an eternity, the rickety door creaked open on its leather hinges. On the other side stood Ral Iltazyarra. The simpleton, too, was as Bareris remembered him, doughy of body and face, with a slack mouth and acne studding his brow and neck.

Bareris threw his arms around him. "My friend," he said, "it's good to see you. Where's Tammith?"

Ral began to sob.

The youth was nice-looking in a common sort of way, but he looked up at Dmitra Flass, often called "First Princess of Thay" for the sake of her sharp wits, iron will, and buxom, rose-and-alabaster comeliness, tharchion of Eltabbar and so mistress of the city in which he dwelled, with a mixture of fear and petulance that could scarcely have been less attractive.

"Maybe I did throw a rock," he whined, "but everyone else was throwing them, too."

"Bad luck for you, then, that you're the one who got caught," Dmitra replied. She shifted her gaze to the blood-orc warrior who'd dragged the prisoner before her throne. "Take him to your barracks and tie him to a post. You and your comrades can throw stones at him and see how he likes it. If there's anything left of him at sunset, turn him loose to crawl away."

The boy started to cry and plead. The orc backhanded him across the face then manhandled him out of her presence. Dmitra looked to see who the next prisoner was—in the wake of a riot, administering justice was a time-consuming, tedious business—and Szass Tam appeared in the back of the hall. She

had a clear view of the doorway but hadn't seen him enter. Nor had she, Red Wizard of Illusion though she was, felt a

pulse of magic. Yet there he was.

And about time, too, she thought. She rose, spread the skirt of her crimson brocade gown, and curtsied. As a mark of special favor, he'd decreed she need no longer kneel to him. Her courtiers and prisoners turned to see whom she was greeting, and they of course hastily abased themselves.

"Rise," said the lich, sauntering toward the dais, the ferule of his ebony staff clicking on the marble floor. "Dmitra, dear, it's obvious you're busy, but I'd appreciate a moment of your time."

"Certainly, Master." She turned to the blood-orc captain.

"Lock up the remaining prisoners until—on second thought, no. I refuse to feed them or squander any more of my time on them. Give them ten lashes each and turn them loose."

She smiled at Szass Tam. "Shall we talk in the garden?"

"An excellent suggestion." He'd always liked the garden, and the open-air setting made it difficult for anyone to eavesdrop.

Outside, it was a fine sunny afternoon, and the air smelled of verdure. Heedless of the thorns, which evidently couldn't pierce or pain his shriveled fingers, Szass Tam picked a yellow rose and carried it with him as they strolled, occasionally lifting it to his nostrils and inhaling deeply.

"I take it," he said, "that news of poor Druxus's assassination triggered a disturbance in the city."

"The ores dealt with it."

He smiled. "I wonder if the mob was celebrating the welcome demise of a hated tyrant or expressing its horror at the foul murder of a beloved leader. Perhaps the commoners don't know themselves. Perhaps they simply enjoy throwing rocks and will seize on any excuse."

She shifted her flared skirt to avoid snagging it on a shrub. "I wondered if you were even aware of Druxus's murder. I assumed

that if you were, you would have come immediately."

"Is that a hint of reproach I hear in your dulcet voice? I came

as soon as it was practical. Believe it or not, matters of consequence sometimes do arise beyond the confines of the capital, and I trusted you to manage here, as you evidently have."

"I managed to keep order. It may take both of us to get to the bottom of Druxus Rhym's murder."

It galled her to admit it. She was proud of the network of spies and covert agents she operated on the lich's and her own behalf, but the affairs of the zulkirs were a difficult and perilous business for any lesser being to investigate.

"What have you learned so far?"

"Precious little. Not long after midnight on the morning of the fifth, someone or something managed to enter Druxus Rhym's apartments undetected. The intruder killed him and his bodyguards with blasts of fire."

"That's certainly enough to suggest a hypothesis. Druxus was well protected against both mundane and mystical threats. It would likely take a master wizard to slip into his bedchamber, a master who then employed evocation magic to accomplish his purpose. Surely the evidence points to Aznar Thrul or one of his particular prote'g^s, acting at his behest."

Perhaps it did. Though relations among the zulkirs were mutable and complex, the council could be viewed as split into two factions, with Mythrellan, zulkir of Illusion, standing aloof from either, and tharchions like Dmitra either tacitly casting their lots with one mage-lord or another or striving assiduously to avoid taking sides. Szass Tam headed up one faction, Druxus Rhym had been his ally, and Aznar Thrul, zulkir of Evocation and tharchion of Priador, was the lich's bitterest rival among the opposition. Thus, it made sense that Aznar might murder Druxus. By so doing, he'd weaken Szass Tarn's party and strengthen his own.

Still, it seemed to Dmitra that perhaps because he and Aznar so loathed one another, the usually judicious Szass Tam was jumping to conclusions. "One needn't specialize in

evocation to conjure fire," she said. "Many wizards can do it."

"True," said the necromancer. "Still, I'm convinced my conjecture is the most plausible explanation."

"I suppose, and if we can prove it, perhaps we can rid ourselves of Thrul. Even his closest allies might forsake him rather than risk being implicated in his crime."

"The problem is, you won't be able to prove it. Aznar is too able an adept."

"Don't be so sure. With all respect, I don't care if he is a zulkir, with scores of potent spells at his command. Everyone makes mistakes. If he wrote anything down or let slip a careless word where a servant could overhear—"

Szass Tam shook his head. "I know the wretch and I can assure you, he didn't. He's too wily. If there's proof to be had, only magic will uncover it, and Yaphyll's the best person to attend to that." The woman to whom he referred was zulkir of Divination, and with Druxus Rhym slain, his staunchest remaining ally on the council. "I need you to focus your energies on another matter."

"Which is?"

"I've decided Samas Kul should be the new zulkir of Transmutation."

"May I ask why? He's a competent mage, but his order has others more learned."

"And I daresay we can trust them to advance the art of transmutation even if they aren't in charge. What's important is that the new zulkir side with us, and Samas will. Our faction is responsible for the new mercantile policy, and he's grown rich as Waukeen heading up the Guild of Foreign Trade. If we make him a zulkir, he'll have even more reason to support us."

"The election of a new zulkir is an internal matter for the order in question. It won't look well if folk realize we're trying to influence the outcome."

"Which is why the business requires your deft and subtle

touch. Samas has the gold to buy support wherever it can be purchased. You and your minions will dig for information we can use to persuade electors not susceptible for bribery, and in general, do whatever you can to shape opinion among the trans-muters. Make Samas seem a demigod and his opponents worms. Do you understand?"

She shrugged. "Of course. Bribery, blackmail, and slander, the same game we usually play."

"Excellent. I knew I could count on you." He raised the yellow rose, saw that it had already blackened and withered in his grasp, and with a sigh tossed it away.

The ironbound door was below street level. Bareris bounded down the stone steps and pounded until the hatch set in the center of the panel opened. A bloodshot eye peered out, and its owner said, "What's the password?"

"Silver." Bareris lifted a coin for the doorkeeper to see.

The other man chuckled. "Close enough." A bar scraped as it slid in its mounts, then the door swung open. Bareris tossed the silver piece to the doorkeeper and advanced into the cellar.

The place had a low ceiling and a dirt floor. The flickering light of a scattering of tallow candles, stuck in wall sconces or empty wine bottles in the centers of the tables, sufficed to reveal the gamblers hunched over their cards and dice, the whores waiting to separate the winners from their profits, and the ruffians on hand to keep order and make sure the house received its cut of every wager. The tapers suffused the air with eye-stinging smoke and their stench, which mingled with the stinks of stale beer and vomit.

Bareris cast about until he spotted Borivik Iltazyarra. Tammith and Ral's father was a stocky fellow with a weak mouth and close-set eyes, which were currently squeezed shut as if in prayer. He shook a leather cup, clattering the dice inside, then threw them down on the table. They came up losers, and he cursed and flung the cup down. The croupier raked in the coins.

Bareris started forward then felt just how furious he was. He paused to take a long, deep breath.

It calmed him to a degree, but not enough to keep him from grabbing hold of Borivik's shoulders and tumbling him out of his chair and onto the floor.

The croupier jumped up and snatched for one of the daggers in his braided yellow belt. Another tough came running. Two of the gamblers started to rise.

Bareris sang a succession of rapidly ascending notes in a tone strident as a glaur horn. Power shimmered through the air. The croupier yelped and recoiled, wetness staining his crotch. His fellow ruffian balked, dropped his cudgel, and backed away trembling, empty hands raised to signal that he no longer intended any harm.

Bareris knew the two irate gamblers weren't experiencing any magical terror. He hadn't been able to cast the effect widely enough to engulf everyone, but the display of arcane power evidently made them think better of expressing their displeasure, because they froze then settled back down in their chairs.

Bareris raked the room with his gaze. "Does anyone else want to meddle in my business?" From the way they all refused to meet his eye, it seemed no one did. "Good." He pivoted back around toward Borivik, who was still sprawled on the floor.

"Bareris!" the older man stammered. "My boy! You . . . couldn't do that before."

In point of fact, he couldn't. For as long as Bareris could remember, he'd possessed a knack for the magic implicit in music, but it was only during his wanderings that it had evolved into a genuinely formidable talent. The ventures he'd undertaken to make his fortune had required that he become a more powerful bard and a stronger swordsman, or else perish.

But he wasn't here to talk about such things. "I saw Ral," he said. "He tried to tell me what happened to Tammith, but he

was too upset to make the details clear if he even understands them. You tell me."

Boravik swallowed. "It was all her own idea. I would never even have thought of such a thing."

"Damn you!" Bareris snarled. "Just tell it, or I'll sing the eyes out of your head."

"All right. We . . . owed coin. A lot. To bad people."

"You mean, you owed it."

It was maddening. Boravik was a skilled potter, or at least he had been once. There was no reason he shouldn't have lived a comfortable, prosperous life, but after his wife died bearing Ral, and it became clear the child was simple, he'd taken to drink, and when he drank, he gambled.

"Have it your way," Boravik said with a hint of sullenness. He made a tentative motion as if to rise, waited to see if Bareris would object, then drew himself clumsily to his feet. "I made the wagers, but the White Raven gang was going to hurt all three of us if I didn't pay. You remember what they're like."

"Go on."

"Well, you know Ral can't work. Maybe I could have, but no one will hire me anymore. Tammith did work, but earning a journeyman's wages, she couldn't make enough. Time was running out, and she decided that, to save us all, she needed to . . . sell herself."

"And you went along with it. You let your own daughter become a slave."

"How was I supposed to stop her, when neither of us could think of another answer? Maybe it won't be so bad for her. She's a fine potter. Good as a master, even if she hadn't worked long enough to claim her medallion. Whoever buys her, it will surely be to take advantage of her talents." Or her beauty, Bareris thought and struggled to suppress the images that rose in his imagination. "Maybe her owner will even let her keep a portion of the coin she earns for him. Maybe in time she can buy her free—"

"Stop prattling! Curse you, I promised I'd come home with

enough wealth to give Tammith everything she could ever want."

"How were we supposed to know it would be this month or even this year? How were we supposed to know you were still alive, or that you still felt the same way about her?"

"I . . . don't know and it doesn't matter anyway. When did Tammith surrender herself?"

"A tenday ago."

A tenday! It was maddening to think that if Bareris had only bade farewell to his comrades and taken ship a little earlier, he might have arrived soon enough to prevent what had happened.

Yet a tenday was also reason for hope. Thay was a large and populous realm possessed of tens of thousands of slaves, but since Tammith had given up her liberty so recently, it should still be possible to trace her.

"I'm going to find Tammith and bring her home," Bareris said. "You get out of this place and don't come back. Use the coin your daughter gave you to pay the White Ravens and care for Ral, as she intended. If I come back to find you've drunk and gambled it all away, I swear by Milil's harp that I'll cut you to pieces."

The snores and slurred mumblings of the sleeping slaves weren't particularly loud, nor was the smell of their bodies intolerably foul. Lying in the midst of them, Tammith Iltazyarra suspected it was actually fear and sadness keeping her awake. In any case, awake she was, and so she stared up into the dark and wondered how things might have been if she'd spoken her heart six years before:

I don't care if we have coin. You're the only thing I need. Stay in Bezantur and marry me today.

Would Bareris have heeded her?

She'd never know, because she hadn't said it or anything like it. How could she, when she'd perceived what was in his heart? He'd said he needed to go for the sake of their future, and he meant it, but he also wanted to go, wanted to see



foreign lands and marvels and prove himself a man capable of overcoming uncommon challenges and reaping uncommon rewards.

Maybe that had been because he was of Mulan descent, hence, at least in theory, a scion of the aristocracy. She, a member of the Rashemi underclass, had never had any particular feeling that she was entitled to a better life or that it would prove her unworthy if she failed to achieve it. He might have believed differently, knowing that at one time, his family had been rich and then lost everything.

Well, no, not everything. They'd still possessed their freedom, and with that reflection, dread clutched her even tighter, and sorrow sharpened into abject misery.

She lay helpless in their grip until someone off to her left started to cry. Then, despite her own wretchedness, she rose from her thin, scratchy pallet. The barracoon had high little windows seemingly intended for ventilation more than illumination but enough moonlight leaked in to enable her to pick

her way through the gloom without stepping on anyone.

The weeping girl lay on her side, legs drawn up and hands hiding her face. Tammith knelt down beside her, gently but insistently lifted her into a sitting position, and took her in her arms. Her fingers sank into the adolescent's mane of long, oily, unwashed hair.

In Thay, folk of Mulan descent removed all the hair from their heads and often their entire bodies. Rashemi freemen didn't invariably go to the same extremes, but if they chose to retain any growth on their scalps at all, they clipped it short to distinguish themselves from slaves, who were forbidden to cut it.

Soon, Tammith thought, I'll have a hot, heavy, filthy mass of hair just like this, and though that was the least of the trials and humiliations the future likely held in store, for some reason, the realization nearly started her sobbing as well.

Instead she held her sister slave and rubbed her back. "It's

all right," she crooned, "it's all right."

"It's not!" the adolescent snarled. She sounded angry but didn't try to extricate herself from Tammith's embrace.

"You're new, so you don't know!"

"Someone has been cruel to you," Tammith said, "but perhaps your new master will be kind and wealthy too. Maybe you'll live in a grand house, wear silk, and eat the finest food. Maybe life will be better than it's ever been before."

Even as she spoke them, Tammith knew her words were ridiculous. Few slaves ended up in the sort of circumstances she was describing, and even if you did, how contemptible you'd be if mere creature comforts could console you for the loss of your liberty, but she didn't know what else to say.

Light wavered through the air, and something cracked. Tammith looked around and saw the slave trader standing in the doorway. An older man with a dark-lipped, crooked mouth, he looked odd in his nightclothes and slippers with a blacksnake whip in one hand and a lantern in the other.

She wondered why he'd bothered to come check on his merchandise in the dead of night when he already employed watchmen for the purpose. Then a different sort of man came through the door behind him, and she caught her breath.

## Chapter two

### 10 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Despite its minute and deliberate imperfections, the sigil branded on Tsagoth's brow stung and itched, nor could his body's resiliency, which shed most wounds in a matter of moments, ease the discomfort. The blood fiend wished he could raise one of his four clawed hands and rip the mark to shreds, but he knew he must bear it until his mission was complete.

Perhaps it was the displeasure manifest in his red-eyed glare and fang-baring snarl that made all the puny little humans cringe from him—not just the wretches scurrying in the

streets of Bezantur, but the youthful, newly minted Red Wizards of Conjunction guarding the gate as well. Tsagoth supposed that in the latter case it must have been. With his huge frame, lupine muzzle, and purple-black scaly hide, he was a monstrosity in the eyes of the average mortal, but no conjuror could earn a crimson robe without trafficking with dozens of entities equally alien to the base material world.

In any case, the doorkeepers were used to watching demons, devils, and elementals, all wearing brands or collars of servitude, come and go on various errands, and they made no effort to bar Tsagoth's entry into their order's Chapter house, a castle of sorts with battlements on the roof and four tiled tetrahedral spires jutting from the corners. A good thing, too. He could dimly sense the wards emplaced to smite any spirit reckless enough to try to break or sneak in, and they were potent.

Inside the structure he found high, arched ceilings supported by rows of red marble columns, faded, flaking frescos decorating the walls, and a trace of the brimstone smell that clung to many infernal beings. He tried to look as if he knew where he was going and was engaged in some licit task as he explored.

No one questioned him as he prowled around, and after a time he peered into yet another hall and beheld a prison of sorts, a pentacle defined in red, white, and black mosaic on the floor. The design caged two devils, both displaying the ire of spirits newly snared and enslaved. The kyton with its shroud of crawling bladed chains snarled threats of vengeance. The bezekira, an entity like a lion made of glare and sparks, hurled itself repeatedly at the perimeter of the pentacle, rebounding each time as if it had collided with a solid wall. Judging from their chatter, the two Red Wizards minding the prisoners had made a wager on how many times the hellcat would subject itself to such indignity before giving up.

It wouldn't do for either the warlocks or the devils to spy

Tsagoth, not yet, so he dissolved into vapor. Even in that form, he wasn't invisible, but when he put his mind to it, he could be singularly inconspicuous. He floated to the ceiling then over the shiny shaven heads of the Red Wizards. Neither they nor their captives noticed.

Beyond the hall with the mosaic pentacle was a row of conjuration chambers adjacent to a corridor. Three of the rooms were

in use, the occupants chanting intricate rhymes to summon additional spitits. One of those chambers was several round-arched doorways removed from the other two, and Tsagoth hoped its relative isolation would keep the warlocks in the other rooms from overhearing anything they shouldn't. Still in mist form, he flowed toward it.

Beyond the arch, a Red Wizard chanted and brandished a ritual dagger in front of another magic circle, this one currently empty and drawn in colored chalk on the floor. Though intent on his magic as any spellcaster needed to be, he had a glowering cast to his expression that suggested he was no happier to be practicing his art than Tsagoth was with his own assignment.

In the wake of Druxus Rhym's assassination, Nevron, zulkir of Conjuration, had directed his underlings to summon spirits to buttress the defenses of himself, Aznar Thrul, and Lauzoril, the third member of their faction. If, as many people believed, Thrul himself had engineered Rhym's death, then it followed that the effort was merely a ruse to divert suspicion, and maybe the fellow flourishing the knife resented being forced to exert himself to no genuine purpose.

Perhaps, Tsagoth thought with a flicker of amusement, he'll thank me for helping him complete his chore quickly. He floated through the arch, over the mage and along the ceiling, then, fast as he could, he streamed down into the center of the pentacle. There he took on solid form once more. His forehead immediately throbbed.

The conjuror stared. A demon was supposed to materialize in the chalk figure, and to superficial appearances, that was exactly what had happened, but it wasn't supposed to manifest until the Red Wizard finished the spell.

"Eenonguk?" he asked.

Tsagoth surmised that was the name of the spirit the warlock had tried to summon, and he was willing to play the part if it would help him complete this phase of his task more easily.

"Yes, Master," he replied.

"No," the wizard said. "You're not Eenonguk. Eenonguk is a babau demon." He dropped the athame to clank on the floor and snatched for the wand sheathed on his hip.

Tsagoth hurled himself forward. As he crossed the boundary of the pentacle, his muscles spasmed, and he staggered. But since the warlock hadn't drawn the figure to imprison creatures of his precise nature, it couldn't contain him.

It had delayed him, though. The wand, a length of polished carnelian, had cleared the sheath, and the Red Wizard nearly had it aimed in his direction. The blood fiend sprinted fast as ever in his long existence, closed the distance, and chopped at the conjuror's wrist with the edge of his lower left hand. The blow jolted the rod from the wizard's grasp.

Tsagoth grappled the Red Wizard, bore him down, and crouched on top of him. He gave the wretch a moment to struggle and feel how helpless he was then bared his fangs.

The display made him feel a pang of genuine thirst, for all that the blood of humans was thin and tasteless stuff. Resisting the impulse to feed, he stared into his captive's eyes and stabbed with all his force of will, stabbed into a mind that, he hoped, terror had disordered and rendered vulnerable.

The Red Wizard stopped squirming.

"You will do what I tell you," Tsagoth said. "You will believe what I tell you." "Yes."

"You meant to summon me here and you did. Afterward, you bound me without incident."

". . . without incident," the mage echoed.

"And now you'll see to it that I'm assigned to the house of Aznar Thrul."

His broad, tattooed hand numbed by all the alcohol he'd already consumed, Aoth Fezim carefully picked up the white ceramic cup and tossed back the clear liquor contained therein. The first few measures had burned going down, but now it was just like drinking water. He supposed his mouth, throat, and guts were numb as well.

His opponent across the table lifted his own cup, then set it down again. He twisted in his chair, doubled over and retched.

Some of the onlookers—those who'd bet on Fezim to win the drinking contest—cheered. Those who'd wagered on his opponent cursed and groaned.

Aoth murmured a charm, and with a tingle, sensation returned to his hands, even as his mind sharpened. It wasn't that he minded being drunk, to the contrary, but it was still relatively early, and he feared passing out and missing all the revelry still to come. Better to sober up now and have the pleasure of drinking himself stupid all over again.

He waved to attract a serving girl's attention and pointed at the length of sausage a fellow soldier was wolfing down. The lass smiled and nodded her understanding, then gave a start when a screech cut through the ambient din. Indeed, the entire tavern fell quiet, even though the cry was nowhere near as frightening as it could be when a person heard it close at hand or could see the creature giving voice to it.

At the same moment, Aoth felt a pang of . . . something. Discomfort? Disquiet?

Whatever it was, nothing could be terribly wrong, could it? After an uneventful flight up the Pass of Thazar, he and Brightwing were properly billeted in the safety of Thazar Keep. He'd seen to his familiar's needs before setting forth in search of his own amusements, and in the unlikely event

that anyone was

idiot enough to bother her, she was more than capable of scaring the dolt away without any help from her master.

Thus, Aoth was tempted to ignore her cry and the uneasiness that bled across their psychic link, but that wasn't the way to treat one's staunchest friend, especially when she was apt to complain about it for days afterward. Consoling himself with the reflection that even if there was a problem, it would likely only take a moment to sort out, he rose, strapped his falchion across his back, and picked up the long spear that served him as both warrior's lance and wizard's staff. Then, pausing to exchange pleasantries with various acquaintances along the way, he headed for the door.

Outside, the night was clear and chilly, the stars brilliant. The buildings comprising the castle—massive donjons and battlements erected in the days of Thay's wars of independence against Mulhorand, when the vale was still of strategic importance—rose black around him, while the peaks of the Sunrise Mountains loomed over those. He headed for the south bailey, where Brightwing was quartered, well away from the stables. Otherwise, her proximity would have driven the horses mad and put a strain on her discipline as well.

A soldier—tall, lanky, plainly Mulan—came around a corner, and an awkward moment followed as he stared down, waiting for Aoth to give way. The problem, Aoth knew, was that while he claimed Mulan ancestry himself, with his short, blocky frame, he didn't look it, particularly in the dark.

He was easygoing by nature, and there was a time when he might simply have stepped aside, but he'd learned that, looking as he did, he sometimes had to insist on niggling matters of precedence lest he forfeit respect. He summoned a flare of silvery light from the head of his lance to reveal the badges of a rider of the elite Griffon Legion and the intricate tattooing and manifest power of a wizard.

Not a Red Wizard. Probably because the purity of his bloodline was suspect, none of the orders had ever sought to recruit him, but in Thay, any true scholar of magic commanded respect, and the other warrior stammered an apology and scurried out of the way. Aoth gave him a nod and tramped onward.

The masters of Thazar Keep housed visiting griffons in an airy, doorless stone hall that was a vague approximation of the caverns in which the species often laired in the wild. At present, Brightwing—so named because, even as a cub, her feathers had been a lighter shade of gold than average—was the only one in residence. Her tack hung from pegs on the wall, and fragments of broken bone and flecks of bloody flesh and fat—all that remained of the side of beef Aoth had requisitioned for her supper—befouled a shallow trough.

Brightwing herself was nine feet long, with a lion's body and the pinions, forelegs, and head of an eagle. Her tail switched restlessly, and her round scarlet eyes opened wide when her master came into view.

"It's about time," she said.

Her beak and throat weren't made for articulating human speech, and most people wouldn't have understood the clacks and squawks. But thanks to the bond they shared, Aoth had no difficulty.

"It's scarcely been any time at all," he replied. "What ails you?"

"I have a feeling," the griffon said. "Something's moving in the night."

He grinned. "Could you be a little less specific?" "It's not a joke."

"If you say so." He respected her instincts. Heeding them had saved his life on more than one occasion. Still, at the moment, he suspected, she was simply in a mood. Maybe the beef hadn't been as fresh as it looked. "Is 'something' inside the walls or outside?"

Brightwing cocked her head and took a moment to answer.



"Outside, I believe."

"Then who cares? The Sunrise Mountains are full of unpleasant beasts. That's why Tharchion Focar still keeps troops here, to keep them from wandering down the pass and harming folk at the bottom. But if something dangerous is prowling around outside the fortress, that's not an emergency. Somebody can hunt it down in the morning."

"Morning may be too late."

"We aren't even part of the garrison here. We just deliver dispatches, remember? Besides which, there are sentries walking the battlements."

"We can see more than they can and see it sooner. I mean, if you'll consent to move your lazy arse."

"What if I find you more meat? Maybe even horseflesh."

"That would be nice. Later."

Aoth sighed and moved to lift her saddle off the wall. "I could have chosen an ordinary familiar. A nice tabby, toad, or owl that would never have given me a moment's trouble, but no, not me. I wanted something special."

Despite his grumbling and near-certainty that Brightwing was dragging him away from his pleasures on a fool's errand, he had to admit, if only to himself, that once the griffon lashed her wings and carried him into the air, he didn't mind so very much. He loved to fly. Indeed, even though the slight still rankled sometimes, in his secret heart, he was glad the Red Wizards had never come for him. He wasn't made for their viciousness and intrigues. He was born for this, which didn't make the high mountain air any less frigid. He focused his attention on one of the tattoos on his chest, activating its magic. Warmth flowed through his limbs, making him more comfortable.

"Which way?" he asked. "Up the pass?"

"Yes," Brightwing answered. She climbed higher then wheeled eastward. Below them, quick and swollen with the spring thaw, the Thazarim River hissed and gurgled, reflecting the stars like an obsidian mirror.

The griffon's avian head shifted back and forth, looking for movement on the ground. Aoth peeted as well, though his night vision was inferior to hers. He might have enhanced it with an enchantment, except that having no notion this excursion was in the offing, he hadn't prepared that particular spell.

Not that it mattered, for there was nothing to see. "I humored you," he said. "Now let's turn back before all the tavern maids choose other companions for the night."

Brightwing hissed in annoyance. "I know all humans have dull senses, but this is pathetic. Use mine instead."

Employing their psychic link, he did as she'd suggested, and the night brightened around him. Nonetheless, at first he didn't see anything so very different. He certainly smelled it, though, a putrid reek that churned his belly.

"Carrion," he said. "Something big died. Or a lot of little things."

"Maybe." She beat her way onward. He considered pointing out that rotting carcasses didn't constitute a threat to Thazar Keep, then decided that particular sensible observation was no more likely to sway her than any of the others had.

At which point the undead came shambling out of the dark, appearing so suddenly that it was as if a charm of concealment had shrouded them until the griffon and her rider were almost directly over their heads. Hunched, withered ghouls, sunken eyes shining like foxfire in their sockets, loped in the lead. Skeletons with spears and bows came after, and shuffling, lurching corpses bearing axes. Inconstant, translucent figures drifted among the horde as well, some shining like mist in moonlight, others inky shadows all but indistinguishable in the gloom.

Aoth stared in astonishment. Like goblins and kobolds, undead creatures sometimes ventured down from the mountains into the pass, but at worst, five or six of them at a time. There were scores, maybe hundreds, of the vile things

advancing below, manifestly united by a common purpose. Just like an army on the march.

"Turn around," the wizard said. "We have to warn the keep."

"Do you really think so," Brightwing answered, "or are you just humoring me?" She dipped one wing, raised the other, and began to wheel. Then something flickered, a blink of blackness against the lesser murk of the night.

Aoth intuited more than truly saw the threat streaking up at them. "Dodge!" he said, and Brightwing veered.

The attack, a jagged streak of shadow erupting from somewhere on the ground, grazed the griffon anyway. Perhaps she'd have fared even worse had it hit her dead on, but as it was, she shrieked and convulsed, plummeting down through the sky for a heart-stopping moment before she spread her wings and arrested her fall.

"Are you all right?" asked Aoth.

"What do you think? It hurt, but I can still fly. What happened?"

"I assume one of those creatures was a sorcerer in life and still remembers some of its magic. Move out before it takes another shot at you."

"Right."

Brightwing turned then cursed. Ragged, mottled sheets of some flexible material floated against the sky like kites carried aloft by the wind. Still relying in part on the griffon's senses, Aoth caught their stink of decay and noticed the subtle, serpentine manner in which they writhed. Though he'd never encountered anything like them before, he assumed they must be

undead as well, animated pieces of skin that had taken advantage of Brightwing's momentary incapacity to soar up into the air and bar the way back to the castle.

The skin kites shot forward like a school of predatory fish. Brightwing veered, seeking to keep them from all converging on her at once. Aoth brandished his spear and rattled off an incantation.

A floating wall of violet flame shimmered and hissed into existence. The onrushing skin kites couldn't stop or maneuver quickly enough to avoid it, and the heat seared them as they hurtled through. They emerged burning like paper and floundered spastically as they charred to ash.

Aoth hadn't been able to conjure a barrier large enough to catch them all, and the survivors streaked after him. He destroyed more with a fan-shaped flare of amber flame then impaled one with a thrust of his lance. Meanwhile, twisting, climbing, diving, Brightwing snapped with her beak and slashed with her talons. Another rider might have worried that his mount's natural weapons would prove of little use against an exotic form of undead. Aoth, however, had long ago gifted the griffon with the ability to rend most any foe, even as he'd enhanced her stamina and intelligence.

The kite on the point of his lance stopped writhing, then Brightwing shrieked and lurched in flight. Aoth cast about and saw one of the membranous creatures adhering to her just below the place where her feathers ended. The kite grew larger. Tufts of hair the same color as the griffon's fur sprouted from its surface.

Aoth recited another spell. Darts of emerald light leaped from his fingertips to pierce the leech-like creature, tearing it to bits. Precise as a healer's lancet, the magic didn't harm Brightwing any further, though it couldn't do anything about the raw, bloody patch the kite left in its wake.

Aoth peered and saw other foes rising into the air. By the dark flame, how many of the filthy things could fly? "Go!" he said. "Before they cut us off again!"

Brightwing shot forward. Aoth plucked a scrap of licorice root from one of his pockets, brandished it, recited words of power, and stroked the griffon's neck. Her wings started beating twice as fast as before, and the pursuing phantoms and bat-winged shadows fell behind. He took a last glance at the force on the ground before the darkness swallowed it anew. The undead foot soldiers started to trot as if

something—their officers?—were exhorting them to greater speed.

During the skirmish, Aoth had been too hard-pressed to feel much of anything. Now that it was over, he yielded to a shudder of fear and disgust. Like any legionnaire, he was somewhat accustomed to tame or civilized undead. The zulkris' armies incorporated skeleton warriors and even a vampire general or two, but encountering those hadn't prepared him for the palpable malevolence, the sickening sense of the unnatural, emanating from the host now streaming down the pass.

But dread and revulsion were of no practical use, so he shoved them to the back of his mind, the better to monitor Brightwing. As soon as the enchantment of speed wore off, he renewed it. The griffon grunted as power burned through her sinews and nerves once more.

The ramparts of Thazar Keep emerged from the gloom. Using Brightwing's eyes, Aoth cast about until he spotted a gnoll on the wall-walk. The sentry with its hyena head and bristling mane sat on a merlon picking at its fur, its long legs dangling.

"Set down there," said Aoth.

"It isn't big enough," Brightwing answered, but she furled her pinions, swooped, and contrived to land on the wall-walk anyway, albeit with a jolt. More intent on grooming itself than keeping watch, the gnoll hadn't noticed their approach.

Startled,

it yipped, recoiled, lost its balance, and for a moment looked in danger of falling off the merlon and down the wall. Brightwing caught hold of it with her beak and steadied it.

"Easy!" said Aoth. "I'm a legionnaire, too, but there is trouble coming. Sound your horn."

The gnoll blinked. "What?"

"Sound the alarm! Now! The castle is about to come under attack!"

The gnoll scrambled to its feet and blew a bleating call on its

ram's-horn bugle, then repeated it over and over. One or two at a time, warriors stumbled from the various towers and barracks. To Aoth, their response seemed sluggish, as if they couldn't imagine that their quiet posting might experience a genuine emergency. He spotted one fellow carrying a bucket instead of a weapon. The fool evidently assumed that if something was genuinely amiss, it could only be a fire, not an assault.

"Find the castellan," said Aoth, and Brightwing leaped into the air. They discovered the captain, an old man whose tattoos had started to fade and blur, in front of the entrance to his quarters, adjusting the targe on his arm and peering around. Brightwing plunged down in front of him, and he jumped just as the gnoll had.

"Sir!" Aoth saluted with his spear. "There are dozens, maybe hundreds, of undead advancing down the pass. I've seen them. You've got to get your men moving, get them into position on the wall. Priests, too, however many you have in residence."

Bellowing orders, the castellan strode toward a barracks and the soldiers forming up outside. After that, things moved faster. Still, to Aoth, it seemed to take an eternity for everyone to reach his battle station.

But maybe the garrison had made more haste than he credited, for when he next looked up the vale, the undead had yet to appear. He realized the flying entities that had putsued him

would certainly have arrived already if they'd continued advancing at maximum speed, but evidently, when it became obvious they couldn't catch him, they'd slowed down so the entire force could move as a unit.

Standing beside him on the wall-walk, squinting against the dark, the castellan growled, "I hope for your sake that this isn't just some drunken . . ." The words caught in his throat as, creeping, gliding, or shuffling silently, the undead emerged from the dark.

"The things in the air are the immediate threat," said Aoth, not because he believed the captain incapable of this elementary tactical insight but to nudge him into action.

"Right you are," the officer rapped. He shouted, "Kill the flyers!"

Bows creaked, and arrows whistled through the air. A priest of Bane shook his fist in its black-enameled gauntlet, and a flare of greenish phosphorescence seared several luminous phantoms from the air. Aoth conjured darting, disembodied sets of sharklike jaws that snapped at wraiths and shadows with their fangs.

Archery and magic both took their toll, but some of the flying undead reached the top of the wall anyway. A gnoll staggered backward and fell to a bone-shattering death with a skin kite plastered to its muzzle. A smallish wraith—the ghost of a little boy, its soft, swollen features rippling as if still resting beneath the water that had drowned the child—reached for a cowering warrior. Brightwing pounced and slashed it to flecks of luminescence with her talons. Aoth felt a chill at his side and pivoted frantically. Almost invisible, just dark against dark, a shadow stood poised to swipe at him. He thrust with his spear and shouted a word of command, expending a measure of the magic stored in the lance to make the attack more potent. His point plunged through the shade's intangible body without resistance, and the thing vanished.

"We're holding them!" someone shouted, his voice shrill with mingled terror and defiance, and so far, he was right.

But charging unopposed while the defenders were intent on their flying comrades, the undead on the ground had reached the foot of the wall. Ghouls climbed upward, their claws finding purchase in the granite. The gate boomed as something strong as a giant sought to batter it down. Walking corpses dug, starting a tunnel, each scoop of a withered, filth-encrusted hand somehow gouging away a prodigious quantity of earth.

Aoth hurled spell after spell. The warriors on the battlements fought like madmen, alternately striking at the phantoms flitting through the air and the snarling, hissing rotten things swarming up from below.

This time it wasn't enough. A dozen ghouls surged up onto the wall-walk all at once. They clawed, bit, and four warriors dropped, either slain or paralyzed by the virulence of their touch. Their courage faltering at last, blundering into one another, nearly knocking one another from the wall in their frantic haste, other soldiers recoiled from the creatures.

Then green light blazed through the air, shining from the Banite cleric's upraised fist. It was a fiercer radiance than he'd conjured before, and though it didn't feel hot to Aoth, it seared the ghouls and the phantoms hovering above the wall from existence.

Indeed, peering around, Aoth saw it had balked the entire assault. Creatures endeavoring to scale the wall lost their grips, fell, and thudded to the ground. Beyond them, other undead cowered, averting their faces from the light. Here and there, one of the mindless lesser ones, a zombie or skeleton, collapsed entirely or crumbled into powder.

Aoth smiled and shook his head. It was astonishing that a cleric in an insignificant outpost like Thazar Keep could exert so much power. Maybe the Banite had been hoarding a talisman

of extraordinary potency, or perhaps he had in desperation called out to his deity, and the Black Hand had seen fit to answer with a miracle.

Trembling, his features taut with a mixture of concentration and exultation, the priest stretched his fist even higher. Aoth inferred that he was about to attempt a feat even more difficult than he'd accomplished already. He meant to scour the entire undead horde from existence.

Then his eyes and most of his features shredded into tattered flesh and gore. One of his foes, perhaps the same spellcasting specter or ghoul that had injured Brightwing,



had somehow resisted his god-granted power and struck back. The Banite reeled, screamed, and the light of the gauntlet guttered out. The undead hurled themselves forward once more.

At least the priest hurt them, thought Aoth. Maybe I can finish what he started. He started to shout an incantation, and darkness swirled around him like smoke from some filthy conflagration. Crimson eyes shone toward the top of the thing amid a protrusion of vapor that might conceivably serve it as a head.

He tried to threaten it with his spear and complete his recitation simultaneously, but even though he was a battle wizard and had trained himself to articulate his spells with the necessary precision even in adverse circumstances, he stumbled over the next syllables, botching and wasting the magic. Suddenly, he had no air to articulate anything. The spirit had somehow leached it from the space around him and even his very lungs.

His chest burning, an unaccustomed panic yammering through his mind, he endeavored to hold his breath, or what little he had left of it, and thrust repeatedly with his spear. If the jabs were hurting his attacker—an undead air elemental, did such entities exist?—he couldn't tell. Darkness seethed at the edges of his vision, and he lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Pinions spread for balance, rearing on her hind legs, Brightwing raked the spirit with her claws and tore at it with her beak. The entity whirled to face her, a movement mainly perceptible by virtue of the rotation of the gleaming eyes in the all but shapeless cloud that was its body, but before it could try stealing her breath, it broke apart into harmless fumes.

Aoth's one desire was to lie where he'd fallen and gasp in breath after breath of air, but his comrades needed the few spells he had left for the casting, so he struggled to his feet and peered around, trying to determine how to exert his

powers to their best effect.

To his dismay, he couldn't tell. It didn't appear there was anything anyone could do to turn the tide. There were more undead than live soldiers on the battlements. The diggers had finished their tunnel under the wall, and ghouls and skeletons were streaming through. Everywhere he looked, shriveled, fungus-spotted jaws tore flesh and guzzled spurting blood, and the gossamer-soft but poisonous touch of shadows and ghosts withered all who suffered it. The air was icy cold and stank of rot and gore.

"Go," someone croaked.

Aoth turned then winced to see the castellan swaying and tottering in place. Moments before, the officer had been an aged man but still vital and hardy. Now he looked as senescent and infirm as anyone Aoth had ever seen. His face had dissolved into countless sagging wrinkles, and a milky cataract sealed one eye. His muscles had wasted away, and his clothes and armor hung loose on his spindly frame. His target was gone, perhaps because he was no longer strong enough to carry it. Aoth could only assume that one of the ghosts had blighted the poor wretch with a strike or grab.

"Go," the captain repeated. "We've lost here. You have to warn the tharchion."

"Yes, sir. Brightwing! We're flying!"

The griffon hissed. Like her master, she didn't relish the idea of running from a fight, even a hopeless one. Still, she crouched, making it easier for him to scramble onto her back, and as soon as he had, she sprang into the air.

As her wings hammered, carrying them higher, another flyer glided in on their flank. With its outstretched bat wings, talons, and curling horns, it somewhat resembled a gargoyle, but it had a whipping serpentine tail and looked as if its body were formed of the same shadowstuff as the night itself. It had no face as such, just a flat triangular space set with a pair of pale eyes blank and round as pearls.

After all that he'd experienced already, Aoth might have

believed himself inured to fear, but when he looked into the entity's eyes, his mouth went dry as sand.

He swallowed and drew breath to recite the most potent attack spell he had left, but the apparition waved a contemptuous hand, signaling that he was free to go, then beat its wings and wheeled away.

## Chapter three

### 12 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

D mitra believed she possessed a larger and more effective network of spies than anyone else in Thay. Still, she'd found that when one wished to gauge the mood of the mob—and every person of consequence, even a zulkir, was well-advised to keep track of it if he or she wished to remain in power—there was no substitute for doing some spying oneself.

Happily, for a Red Wizard of Illusion, the task was simple. She merely cloaked herself in the appearance of a commoner, slipped out of the palace via one of the secret exits, and wandered the taverns and markets of Eltabbar eavesdropping.

She generally wore the guise of a pretty Rashemi lass. It was less complicated to maintain an effective disguise if appearance didn't differ too radically from the underlying reality. It was easier to carry oneself as the semblance ought to move and speak as it ought to speak. The illusion had an additional advantage as well. When she cared to join a conversation, most

men were happy to allow it.

But by the same token, a comely girl roaming around unescorted sometimes attracted male attention of a type she didn't want. It was happening now, as she stood jammed in with the rest of the crowd. A hand brushed her bottom—it could have been inadvertent, so she waited—then returned to give her a pinch.

She didn't jerk or whirl around. She turned without haste. It gave her time to whisper a charm.

The leer would have made it easy to identify the lout who'd touched her even if he hadn't been standing directly behind her. He was tall for a commoner, and his overshot chin and protruding lower canines betrayed orcish blood. She stared into his eyes and breathed the final word of her incantation.

The half-ore screamed and blundered backward, flailing at

the illusion of nightmarish assailants she'd planted in his mind. The press was such that he inevitably collided with other rough characters, who took exception to the jostling. A burly man carrying a wooden box of carpenter's tools booted the half-ore's legs out from under him then went on kicking and stamping when the oaf hit the ground. Other men clustered around and joined in.

Smiling, hoping they'd cripple or kill the half-ore, Dmitra turned back around to watch the play unfolding atop a stage built of crates at the center of the plaza. The theme was Thay's recent triumph in the Gorge of Gauros. A clash of armies seemed a difficult subject for a dozen ragtag actors to address, but changing their rudimentary costumes quickly and repeatedly as they assumed various roles, they managed to limn the story in broad strokes.

It was no surprise that a troupe of players had turned the battle into a melodrama. Such folk often mined contemporary events for story material, sometimes risking arrest when the results mocked or criticized their betters. What impressed Dmitra was the enthusiasm this particular play engendered.

The audience cheered on the heroic tharchions and legionnaires, booed and hissed the bestial Rashemi, and groaned whenever the latter seemed to gain the upper hand.

Dmitra supposed it was understandable. Thayans had craved a victory over Rashemen for a long time, and perhaps Druxus Rhym's murder made them appreciate it all the more. Even folk who claimed to loathe the zulkirs—and the Black Lord knew, there were many—might secretly welcome a sign that the established order was still strong and unlikely to dissolve into anarchy anytime soon.

Still, something about the mob's reaction troubled her, even if she couldn't say why.

One of the lead actors ducked behind a curtain. He sprang back out just a moment later, but that had been enough

time to doff the bear-claw necklace and long, tangled wig that had marked him as a Rashemi chieftain and don a pink—he couldn't dress in actual red under penalty of law—skull-emblazoned tabard in their place. He flourished his hands as if casting a spell, and the audience cheered even louder than before to see Szass Tam magically materialize on the scene just when it seemed the day was lost.

Dmitra knew the reaction ought to please her, for after all, the lich was her patron. If the rabble loved him, it could only strengthen her own position. Still, her nagging disquiet persisted.

She decided not to linger until the end of the play. She'd assimilated what it had to teach her, and to say the least, the quality of the performance was insufficient to detain her. She made her way through Eltabbar's tangled streets to what appeared to be a derelict cobbler's shop, glanced around to make sure no one was watching, unlocked the door with a word of command, and slipped inside. A concealed trapdoor at the rear of the shop granted access to the tunnels below.

Dmitra reflected that she'd traversed the maze so often, she could probably do it blind. It might even be amusing to try sometime, but not today. Too many matters demanded her attention. She conjured a floating orb of silvery glow to light her way then climbed down the ladder.

In no time at all, she was back in her study, a cozy, unassuming room enlivened by fragrant, fresh-cut tulips and lilies and the preserved heads of two of her old rivals gazing morosely down from the wall. She dissolved her disguise with a thought, cleaned the muck from her shoes and the hem of her gown with a murmured charm, then waved her hand. The sonorous note of a gong shivered through the air, and a page scurried in to find out what she wanted.

"Get me Malark Springhill," she said.

By marriage, Dmitra was the princess of Mulmaster, even if she didn't spend much time there, or in the company of her

husband, for that matter, and she'd imported some of her most useful servants from that distant city-state. Her hope was that their lack of ties to anyone else in Thay would help ensute their loyalty. Despite the fact that he now shaved his head and sported tattoos like a Mulan born, Malark was one of these expatriates. Compactly built with a small wine red birthmark on his chin, he didn't look particularly impressive, certainly not unusually dangerous, until one noticed the deft economy of his movements or the cool calculation in his pale green eyes.

"Tharchion," he said, kneeling.

"Rise," she said, "and tell me how you're getting along."

"We're making progress. One of Samas Kul's opponents has withdrawn from the election. Another is being made to appear petty and inept."

"So Kul will be the next zulkir of Transmutation." Malark hesitated. "I'm not prepared to promise that as yet. It's not easy manipulating a brotherhood of wizards. Something could still go wrong."

She sighed. "I would have preferred a guarantee. Still, we'll have to trust your agents to complete the work successfully. I have another task for you, one you must undertake unassisted." She told him what it was.

Her orders brought a frown to his face. "May I speak candidly?"

"If you must," she said, her tone grudging.

Actually, she valued his counsel. It had spared her a costly misstep, or provided the solution to a thorny problem, on more than one occasion, but it wouldn't do to permit him or any of her servants to develop an inflated sense of his importance.

"This could be dangerous, not just for me but for both of us."

"I'm sending you because I trust you not to get caught."

"The tharchion knows I'm willing to take risks in pursuit of sensible ends—"

She laughed. "Are you saying I've lost my sense?"

He peered at her as if trying to gauge whether he had in fact given offense. Good. Let him wonder.

"Of course not, High Lady," he said at length, "but I don't understand what you're trying to achieve. Whatever I learn, what will it gain you?"

"I can't say, but knowledge is strength. I became 'First Princess of Thay' by understanding all sorts of things, and I mean to comprehend this as well."

"Then, if I have your leave to withdraw, I'll go and pack my saddlebags."

Bareris doggedly jerked the rope, and the brass bell mounted beside the door clanged over and over again. Eventually the door opened partway, revealing a stout man with a coiled whip

and a ring of iron keys hanging from his belt. For a moment, his expression seemed welcoming enough, but when he saw who was seeking admittance, it hardened into a glare.

"Go away," he growled, "we're closed."

"I'm sorry to disturb the household," Bareris answered, "but my business can't wait."

It was less than two hundred miles from Bezantur to the city of Tyraturos, but the road snaked up the First Escarpment, an ascending series of sheer cliffs dividing the Thayan lowlands from the central plateau. Bareris had nearly killed a fine horse making as good a time as he had then spent a long, frustrating day trying to locate one particular slave trader in a teeming commercial center he'd never visited before. Having reached his destination at last, he had no intention of meekly going away and returning in the morning. He'd shove his way in if he had to.

But perhaps softer methods would suffice. "How would you like to earn a gold piece?" "Doing what?"

"The same thing you do during the day. Show me the slaves."

The watchman hesitated. "That's all?" "Yes."

"Give me the coin."



Batetis handed over the coin. The guard bit it, pocketed it, then led him into the barracoon, a shadowy, echoing place that smelled of unwashed bodies. The bard felt as if he were all but vibrating with impatience. It took an effort to keep from demanding that his guide quicken the pace.

In fact, they reached the long open room where the slaves slept soon enough. The wan yellow light of a single lantern just barely alleviated the gloom. The watchman called for his charges to wake and stand, kicking those who were slow to obey.

Confident of his ability to recognize Tammith even after six years, even in the dark, Bareris scrutinized the women.

Then his guts twisted, because she wasn't here. Tracking her, he'd discovered that since becoming a slave, she'd passed in and out of the custody of multiple owners. The merchant who'd bought her originally had passed her on to a caravan master, a middleman who made his living moving goods inland from the port. He then handed her off to one of the many slave traders of Tyraturos.

Who had obviously sold her in his turn, with Bareris once again arriving too late to buy her out of bondage. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and reminded himself he hadn't failed. He simply had to follow the trail a little farther. He turned toward the watchman. "I'm looking for a particular woman. Her name is Tammith Itazyarra, and I know you had her here within the past several days, maybe even earlier today. She's young, small, and slim, with bright blue eyes. She hasn't been a slave for very long: Her black hair is still short, and she doesn't have old whip scars on her back. You almost certainly sold her to a buyer who wanted a skilled potter. Or ... or to someone looking to purchase an uncommonly pretty girl."

The watchman sneered. Maybe he discerned how frantic Bareris was to find Tammith, and as was often the case with bullies, another person's need stirred his contempt.

"Sorry, friend. The wench was never here. I wish she had

been. Sounds like I could have had a good time with her before we moved her out."

Bareris felt as if someone had dumped a bucket of icy water over his head. "This is the house of Kanithar Chergoba?"

"Yes," said the guard, "and now that you see your trollop isn't here, I'll show you the way out of it."

Indeed, Bareris could see no reason to linger. He'd evidently deviated from Tammith's trail at some point, though he didn't

understand how that was possible. Had someone lied to him along the way, and if so, why? What possible reason could there be?

All he knew was his only option was to backtrack. Too sick at heart to speak, he waved his hand, signaling his willingness for the watchman to conduct him to the exit, and then a realization struck him.

"Wait," he said.

"Why? You've had your look."

"I paid gold for your time. You can spare me a few more moments. I've heard your master is one of the busiest slave traders in the city, and it must be true. This room can house hundreds of slaves, yet I only see a handful."

The watchman shrugged. "Sometimes we sell them off faster than they come in."

"I believe you," Bareris said, "and I suspect your stock is depleted because someone bought a great many slaves at once. That could be why you don't remember Tammith. You never had a reason or a chance to give her any individual attention."

The watchman shook his head. "You're wrong. It's been months since we sold more than two or three at a time."

Bareris studied his face and was somehow certain he was lying, but what did he have to gain by dissembling? By the silver harp, had they sold Tammith to a festhall or into some other circumstance so foul that he feared to admit it to a man who obviously cared about her?

The bard struggled to erase any trace of rancor from his features. "Friend, I know I don't look it in these worn, dusty clothes with my hair grown out like an outlander's, but I'm a wealthy man. I have plenty more gold to exchange for the truth, and I give you my word that however much it upsets me, I won't take my anger out on you."

The guard screwed up his features in an almost comical expression of deliberation, then said, "Sorry. The girl wasn't here."

We didn't sell off a bunch of slaves all at once. You're just wrong about everything."

"I doubt it. You paused to consider before you spoke. If you don't have anything to tell me, what was there to think about? You were weighing greed against caution, and caution came out the winner. Well, that's all right. I can appeal to your sense of self-preservation if necessary." With one smooth, sudden, practiced motion intended to demonstrate his facility with a blade, Bareris whipped his sword from its scabbard. The guard jumped back, and a couple of the slaves gasped.

"Are you crazy?" stammered the guard, his hand easing toward the whip on his belt. "You can't murder me just because I didn't tell you what you want to hear!"

"I admit," Bareris replied, advancing with a duelist's catlike steps, "my conscience will trouble me later, but you're standing between me and everything I've wanted for the past six years. Or since I was eight, really. That's enough to make me set aside my scruples. Oh, and snatch for the whip if you must, but in all my wanderings, I never once saw rawhide prevail against steel."

"If you hurt me, the watch will hang you."

"I'll be out of the city before anyone knows you're dead, except these slaves, and I doubt they love you well enough to raise the alarm."

"I'll shout for help."

"It won't arrive in time. I'm almost within sword's reach

already."

The watchman whirled and lunged for the door. Bareris sang a quick phrase, sketched an arcane figure in the air with his off hand, and expelled the air from his lungs. Engulfed in a plume of noxious vapor, the guard stumbled and doubled over retching. Holding his breath to avoid a similar reaction, Bareris grabbed the man and pulled him out of the invisible but malodorous fumes. He then dumped the guard on his back, poised his sword

at his breast, and waited for his nausea to subside.

When it did, he said, "This is your last chance. Tell me now, or I'll kill you and look for someone else to question. You're not the only lout on the premises."

"All right," said the slaver, "but please, you can't tell anyone who told you. They said we weren't to talk about their business."

"I swear by the Binder and his Hand," Bareris said. "Now who in the name of the Abyss are you talking about?" "Red Wizards."

At last Bareris understood the watchman's reluctance to divulge the truth. Everyone with even a shred of prudence feared offending members of the scarlet orders. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"They—the mages and their servants—came in the middle of the night, just like you. They bought all the stock we had, just the way you figured. They told Chergoba that if we kept our mouths shut, they'd be back to buy more, but if we prattled about them, they'd know, and return to punish us."

"What were the wizards' names?"

"They didn't say."

"Where did they mean to take the slaves?"

"I don't know."

"Why did they want them?"

"I don't know! They didn't say and we had better sense than to ask. We took their gold and thought ourselves lucky they paid the asking price. But if they'd offered only a pittance,

or nothing at all, what could we have done about it?"

Bareris stepped away from the watchman and tossed him another gold piece. "I'll let myself out. Don't tell anyone I was here, or that you told me what you have, and you'll be all right." He started to slide his sword back into its worn leather scabbard then realized there was one more question he should ask. "To

which order did the wizards belong?"

"Necromancy, I think. They had black trim on their robes and jewelry in the shapes of skulls and things."

Red Wizards of Necromancy! Bareris pondered the matter as he prowled onward through the dark, for Milil knew, he couldn't make any sense of it.

It was the most ordinary thing in the world for wealthy folk to buy slaves, but why in the middle of the night? Why the secrecy?

It suggested there was something illicit about the transaction or the purchasers' intent, but how could there be? By law, slaves were property, with no rights whatsoever. Even commoners could buy, sell, exploit, and abuse them however they chose, and Red Wizards were Thay's ruling elite, answerable to no one but their superiors.

Bareris sighed. Maybe the watchman was right; maybe it was something ordinary folk were better off not understanding. After all, his objective hadn't changed. He simply wanted to find Tammith.

Evidently hoping to avoid notice, the necromancers had marched her and the other slaves away under cover of darkness, but someone had seen where they went. A whore. A drunk. A beggar. A cutpurse. One of the night people who dwell in every city.

Exhausted as he was, eyes burning, an acid taste searing his mouth, Bareris cringed at the prospect of commencing yet another search, this one through squalid stews and taverns, yet he could no more have slept than he could have sung Selune down from the sky. He arranged his features into a

smile and headed for a painted, half-clad woman lounging in a doorway.

The fighter was beaten but too stubborn to admit it, as he demonstrated by struggling back onto his feet.

Calmevik grinned. If the smaller pugilist wanted more punishment, he was happy to oblige. He lowered his guard and stepped in, inviting his opponent to swing. Dazed, the other fighter responded with slow, clumsy haymakers, easily dodged. The spectators laughed when Calmevik ducked and twisted out of the way.

It was amusing to make his adversary reel and stumble uselessly around, but Calmevik couldn't continue the game for long. The urge to beat and break the other man was too powerful. He froze him with a punch to the solar plexus, shifted in, and drove an elbow strike into his jaw. Bone crunched. Calmevik then hooked his opponent's leg with his own, grabbed the back of his head, and smashed him face first to the plank floor where he lay inert, blood seeping out from around his head like the petals of a flower.

The onlookers cheered. Calmevik laughed and raised his fists, acknowledging their acclaim, feeling strong, dauntless, invincible—

Then he spotted the child, if that was the right word for it, peeking in the tavern doorway, one puffy, pasty hand pushing the bead curtain aside, the hood of its shabby cloak shadowing its features. The creature had the frame of a little girl and he was the biggest man in the tavern, indeed, one of the biggest in all Tyraturos, and he had no reason to believe the newcomer meant him any harm. Still, when it crooked its finger, his elation gave way to a pang of trepidation.

Had he known what it would involve, he never would have taken the job, no matter how good the pay, but he hadn't, and now he was stuck taking orders from the ghastly representative his client had left behind. There was nothing to do but finish the chore, pocket the coin, and hope that in

time he'd stop dreaming about the child's face.

Striving to make sure no one could tell he was rattled, he made his excuses to his sycophants, pulled on his tunic, belted on his broadsword and dirks, and departed the tavern. Presumably because it was the way in which an adult and little girl might be expected to walk the benighted streets, the child intertwined its soft, clammy fingers with his. He had to fight to keep himself from wrenching his hand away.

"He's here," she said in a high, lisping voice.

Calmevik wondered who "he" was and what he'd done to deserve the fate that was about to overtake him, but no one had volunteered the information, and he suspected he was safer not knowing. "Just one man?"

"Yes."

"I won't need help, then." Which meant he wouldn't have to share the gold.

"Are you sure? My master doesn't want any mistakes."

She might be a horror loathsome enough to turn his bowels to water, but even so, professional pride demanded that he respond to her doubts with the hauteur they deserved. "Of course I'm sure! Aren't I the deadliest assassin in the city?"

She giggled. "You say so, and I am what I am, so I suppose we can kill one bard by ourselves."

Tired as he was, for a moment Bareris wasn't certain he was actually hearing the crying or only imagining it. But it was real. Somewhere down the crooked alleyway, someone—a little girl, perhaps, by the sound of it—was sobbing.

He thought of simply walking on. After all, it was none of his affair. He had his own problems, but he'd feel callous and mean if he ignored a child's distress.

Besides, if he helped someone else in need, maybe help would

come to him in turn. He realized it was scarcely a Thayan way to think. His countrymen believed the gods sent luck to the strong and resolute, not the gentle and compassionate,

but some of the friends he'd found on his travels believed such superstitions.

He started down the alley. By the hour, it was dark, without a trace of candlelight leaking through doors or windows, and the high, peaked rooftops blocking all but a few of the stars. He sang a floating orb of silvery glow into being to light his way.

Even then, it was difficult to make out the little girl. Slumped in her dark cloak at the end of the cul-de-sac, she was just one small shadow amid the gloom. Her shoulders shook as she wept.

"Little girl," Bareris said, "are you lost? Whatever's wrong, I'll help you."

The child didn't respond, just kept on crying.

She must be utterly distraught. He walked to her, dropped to one knee, and laid a hand on one of her heaving shoulders.

Even through the wool of her cloak, her body felt cold, and more than that, wrong in some indefinable but noisome way. Moreover, a stink hung in the air around her.

Surprise made him falter, and in that instant, she—or rather, it—whirled to face him. Its puffy face was ashen, its eyes, black and sunken. Pus and foam oozed around the stained, crooked teeth in their rotting gums.

Its grip tight as a full-grown man's, the creature grabbed hold of Bareris's extended arm, snapped its teeth shut on his wrist, and then, when the leather sleeve of his brigandine failed to yield immediately, began to gnaw, snarling like a hound.

Bareris flailed his arm and succeeded in shaking the child-thing loose. It hissed and rushed in again, and he whipped out a dagger and poised it to rip the creature's belly.

At that moment, he would have vowed that every iota of his attention was on the implike thing in front of him, but during his time as a mercenary, fighting dragon worshipers, hobgoblins,

and reavers of every stripe, he'd learned to register any



flicker of motion in his field of vision. For as often as not, it wasn't the foe you were actually trying to fight who killed you. It was his comrade, slipping in a strike from the flank or rear.

Thus, he noticed a shift in the shadows cast by his floating light. It seemed impossible—the alley had been empty except for the child-thing, hadn't it?—but somehow, someone or something had crept up behind him while the creature kept his attention riveted on it.

Still on one knee, Bareris jerked himself around to confront the new threat. The lower half of his face masked by a scarf, a huge man in dark clothing stood poised to cut down at him with a broadsword. The weapon had a slimy look, as if its owner had smeared it with something other than the usual rust-resisting oil. Poison, like as not.

With only a knife in his hand, and his new assailant manifestly a man of exceptional strength, Bareris very much doubted his ability to parry the heavier blade. The stroke flashed at him, and he twisted aside, simultaneously thrusting with the dagger.

He was aiming for the big man's groin. He missed, but at least the knife drove into his adversary's thigh, and the masked man froze with the shock of it. The bard pulled the weapon free for a second attack, then something slammed into his back. Arms and legs wrapped around him. Teeth tore at the high collar of his brigandine, and cold white fingers groped for his eyes.

The child-thing had jumped onto his shoulders. He reared halfway up then immediately threw himself on his back. The jolt loosened the little horrors grip. He wrenched partially free of it and pounded elbow strikes into its torso, snapping ribs. The punishment made it falter, and he heaved himself entirely clear.

By then, though blood soaked the leg of his breeches, the big man was rushing in again. Bareris bellowed a battle cry infused with the magic of his voice. Vitality surged through

his limbs,  
and his mind grew calm and clear. Even more importantly, the masked ruffian hesitated, giving him time to spring to his feet, switch his dagger to his left hand, and draw his sword.

"I'm not the easy mark you expected, am I?" he panted.  
"Why don't you go waylay someone else?"

He thought they might heed him. He'd hurt them, after all, but instead, apparently confident that the advantages conferred by superior numbers and a poisoned blade would prevail, they spread out to flank him. The masked man whispered words of power and sketched a mystic figure with his off hand. For a moment, an acrid smell stung Bareris's nose, and a prickling danced across his skin, warning signs of some magical effect coming into being.

Wonderful. On top of everything else, the whoreson was a spellcaster. That explained how he'd concealed himself until he was ready to strike.

For all Bareris knew, the masked man's next effort might kill or incapacitate him. He had to disrupt the casting if possible, and so, even though it meant turning his back on the child-thing, he screamed and sprang at the larger of his adversaries.

He thought he had a good chance of scoring. He was using an indirect attack that, in his experience, few adversaries could parry, and with a wounded leg, the masked man ought not to be able to defend by retreating out of the distance.

Yet that was exactly what he did. Bareris's attack fell short by a finger length. The masked man beat his blade aside and lunged in his turn.

The riposte streaked at Bareris's torso, driving in with dazzling speed. Evidently the big man had cast an enchantment to quicken his next attack, and with Bareris still in the lunge, it only had a short distance to travel. The bard was sure, with that bleak certainty every fencer knows, that the stroke was going to hit him.

Yet even if his intellect had resigned itself, his reflexes, honed

in countless battles and skirmishes, had not. He recovered out of the lunge. It didn't carry him beyond the range of the big man's weapon, but it obliged it to travel a little farther, buying him the time and space at least to attempt a parry. He swept his blade across his body and somehow intercepted his adversary's sword. Steel rang, and the impact almost broke his grip on his hilt, but he kept the poisoned edge from slashing his flesh.

Eyes glaring above the scarf, the big man bulled forward, rendering both their swords useless at such close quarters, evidently intending to use his superior strength and size to shove Bareris down onto his back. Perhaps frustration or the pain of his leg wound had clouded his judgment, for the move was a blunder. He'd forgotten the dagger in the bard's left hand.

Bareris reminded him of its existence by plunging it into his kidney and intestines. Then the child-thing grabbed his legs from behind. Its teeth tore at his leg.

Grateful that his breeches were made of the same sturdy reinforced leather as his brigandine, Bareris wrenched himself around, breaking the creature's hold and turning the masked man with him like a dance partner. He flung the ruffian down on top of his hideous little accomplice then hacked relentlessly with his sword. Both his foes stopped moving before either could disentangle him- or itself from the other.

His sword abruptly heavy in his hand, Bareris stood over the corpses gasping for breath. The fear he couldn't permit himself while the fight was in progress welled up in him, and he shuddered, because the fracas had come far too close to killing him and left too many disquieting questions in its wake.

Who was the masked ruffian, and what manner of creature was his companion? Even more importantly, why had they

sought to kill Bareris?

Perhaps it wasn't all that difficult to figure out. As Bareris wandered the night asking his questions, he'd mentioned repeat-

edly that he could pay for the answers. Small wonder, then, if a thief targeted him for a robbery attempt. The masked man had been such a scoundrel, and as for the child-thing ... well, Thay was full of peculiar monstrosities. The Red Wizards created them in the course of their experiments. Perhaps one had escaped from its master's laboratory then allied itself with an outlaw as a means of surviving on the street.

Surely that was all there was to it. In Bareris's experience, the simplest explanation for an occurrence was generally the correct one.

In any case, the affair was over, and puzzling over it wasn't bringing him any closer to locating Tammith. He cleaned his weapons on his adversaries' garments, sheathed them, and headed out of the alley.

As he did so, his neck began to smart. He lifted his hand to his collar and felt the gnawed, perforated leather and the raw bloody flesh beneath. The girl-thing had managed to bite him after all. Just a nip, really, but he remembered the creature's filthy mouth, winced, and washed the wound with spirits at the first opportunity. Then it was back to the hunt.

It was nearly cock's crow when a pimp in a high plumed hat and gaudy parti-colored finery told him what he needed to know, though it was scarcely what he'd hoped to hear.

He'd prayed that Tammith was still in Tyraturos. Instead, the necromancers had marched the slaves they'd purchased out of the city. They'd headed north on the High Road, the same major artery of trade he'd followed up from Bezantur.

He reassured himself that the news wasn't really too bad. At least he knew what direction to take, and a procession of slaves on foot couldn't journey as fast as a horseman traveling hard.

He doubted the horse he'd ridden up from the coast could endure another such journey so soon. He'd have to buy another—

Weakness overwhelmed him and he reeled off balance, bumping his shoulder against a wall. His body suddenly felt icy cold, cold enough to make his teeth chatter, and he realized he was sick.

#### Chapter four

19-20 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Tsagoth heard the slaves when he and his fellow demons and devils were still some distance from the door. The mortals were banging on the other side of it and wailing, pleading for someone to let them out.

Their agitation was understandable, for in one respect at least, Aznar Thrul was a considerate master to the infernal guards the Red Wizards of Conjunction had given him. He'd ordered his human servants to determine the dietary preferences of each of the newcomers and to provide for each according to his desires.

Some of the nether spirits were happy to subsist on the same fare as the mortal contingent of the household. Others craved the raw flesh or blood of a fresh kill, preferably one they'd slaughtered themselves. A number even required the meat or gore of a human or other sentient being. Tsagoth currently stalked among the latter group as they headed in to supper.

Yes, he thought bitterly, everyone had exactly what he needed.

Everyone but him, as the nagging hollowness in his belly, grown wearisome as the smarting, itching mark on his brow, attested.

The abyssal realms were vast, and the entities that populated them almost infinite in their diversity. Even demons couldn't identify every other type of demon, nor devils every other sort of devil, thus no one had figured out precisely what manner of being Tsagoth truly was. But had

he explained or demonstrated what he actually wanted in the way of a meal, that would almost certainly have given the game away.

A hezrou—a demon like a man-sized toad with spikes running down its back and arms and hands in place of forelegs—turned the handle and threw open the door. The slaves screamed and recoiled.

The hezrou sprang on a man, drove its claws into his chest, and carried him down beneath it. Other spirits seized their prey with the same brutal efficiency. Some, however, possessed a more refined sense of cruelty, and savoring their victims' terror, slowly backed them up against the walls. An erinyes, a devil resembling a beautiful woman with feathered wings, alabaster skin, and radiant crimson eyes, cast a charm of fascination on the man she'd chosen. Afterward, he stood paralyzed, trembling, desire and dread warring in his face, as she glided toward him.

Tsagoth didn't want to reveal his own psychic abilities, and in his present foul humor, tormenting the humans was a sport that held no interest for him. Like the toad demon and its ilk, he simply snatched up a woman and bit open her neck.

The slave's bland, thin blood eased the dryness in his throat and the ache in his belly, but only to a degree. He contemplated the erinyes, now crouching over the body of her prey, tearing chunks of his flesh away and stuffing them in her mouth. How easy it would be to leap onto her back—Yes, easy and suicidal. With an effort, he averted his gaze.

After their meal, the demons and devils dispersed, most returning to their duties, the rest wandering off in search of rest or amusement. Tsagoth prowled the chambers and corridors of the castle and tried to formulate a strategy that would carry him to his goal.

The dark powers knew, he needed a clever idea, because Aznar Thrul's palace had proved to be full of secrets, hidden passages, magical wards, and servants who neither knew

nor desired to know anything of the zulkir's business except as it pertained to their own circumscribed responsibilities. How, then, was Tsagoth to ferret out the one particular secret that would allow him to satisfy his geas?

Somebody could tell him, of that he had no doubt, but he didn't dare just go around questioning lackeys at random. His hypnotic powers, though formidable, occasionally met their match in a will of exceptional strength, and if he interrogated enough people, it was all but inevitable that someone would recall the experience afterward.

Thus, he at least needed to concentrate his efforts on those most likely to know, but what group was that exactly? It was hard to be certain when the intricacies of life in the palace were so strange to him. He'd rarely visited the mortal plane before, and even in his own domain, he was a solitary haunter of the wastelands, not a creature of castles and communities.

Perhaps because he'd just come from his own meager and unsatisfying repast, it occurred to him that he did comprehend one thing: Everyone, demon or human, required nourishment.

Accordingly, Tsagoth made his way to the kitchen, or complex of kitchens, an extensive open area warm with the heat of its enormous ovens and brick hearths. There sweating cooks peeled onions and chopped up chickens with cleavers. Bakers rolled out dough. Pigs roasted on spits, pots steamed and bubbled, and scullions scrubbed trays.

Tsagoth had an immediate sense that the activity in this precinct of the palace never stopped. It faltered, though, when a woman noticed him peering through the doorway. She squawked, jumped, and dropped a saucepan, which fell to the floor with a clank. Her coworkers turned to see what had startled her, and they blanched too.

The blood fiend realized he could scarcely question one of them with the others looking on. He stalked off but didn't go far. Just a few paces away was a cold, drafty pantry with a

marble counter and shelves climbing the walls. He slipped inside, deepened the ambient shadows to help conceal himself, and squatted down to wait.

Soon enough, a lone cook with a stained white apron and a dusting of flour on her face and hands scurried past, plainly in a hurry to accomplish some errand or other. It was the work of an instant to lunge out after her, clap one of his hands over her mouth and immobilize her with the other three, and haul her into the cupboard.

He stared into her wide, rolling eyes and stabbed with his will. She stopped struggling.

"I'm your master, and you'll do as I command." He uncovered her mouth. "Tell me you understand."

"I understand." She didn't display a dazed, somnolent demeanor like that of the Red Wizard of Conjunction he'd controlled. Rather, she was alert and composed, as if performing a routine part of her duties for a superior who had no reason to feel displeased with her.

Tsagoth set her on the floor and let go of her. "Tell me how to find Mari Agneh."

In her time, Mari Agneh had been tharchion of Priador, until Aznar Thrul decided to depose her and take the office for himself. Mari desperately wanted to retain her authority, and that, coupled with the fact that it was an unprecedented breach of custom for any one individual to be zulkir and tharchion

both, impelled her to a profoundly reckless act: She'd appealed to Szass Tam and his allies among the mage-lords to help her keep her position.

But the lich saw no advantage to be gained by involving himself in her struggle, or perhaps he found it outrageous that any tharchion should seek to defy the will of any zulkir, even his principal rival. Either way, he declined to help her, and when Thrul learned of her petition, he was no longer content merely to usurp her office. He made her disappear.

Rumor had it that he'd taken her prisoner to abuse as his



slave and sexual plaything, that she was still alive somewhere within the walls of this very citadel. Tsagoth fervently hoped that it was so. Otherwise, it would be impossible for him to fulfill his instructions, which meant he'd be trapped here forever.

The cook spread her hands. "I'm sorry, Master. I've heard the stories. Everyone has, but I don't know anything."

"If she's here," Tsagoth said, "she has to eat. Someone in the kitchen has to prepare her meals, and someone has to carry them to her."

The cook frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose that's true, but we fix so much food and send it all over the palace, day and night—"

"This is one meal," Tsagoth said. "It's prepared on a regular basis, and it goes somewhere no other meal goes. It's likely the man who prepares it has never been told who ultimately receives it. If he does know, he hasn't shared the secret with anyone else in the kitchen. Does that suggest anything to you?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Master, no."

Frustrated, he felt a sudden wayward urge to grab her again and yank the head off her shoulders, but tame demon that he supposedly was, he couldn't just slaughter whomever he wanted and leave the corpses lying around. Besides, she might still be useful.

"It's all right," he said, "but now that you know what to look for, you'll watch. You won't realize you're watching or remember talking to me, but you'll spy anyway, and if you discover anything, you'll find me and tell me."

"Yes, Master, anything you say."

He sent her on her way, then crouched down and waited for the next lone kitchen worker to bustle by.

Aoth swung himself down off Brightwing and took a final glance around, making sure there were no horses in the immediate vicinity.

Divining his concern, the griffon snorted. "I can control

myself."

"Maybe, but the horses don't know that." He ruffled the feathers on her neck then tramped toward the big tent at the center of the camp. Cast in the stylized shape of a griffon, his shiny new gold medallion gleamed as it caught the light of the cook fires. The badge proclaimed him a newly minted officer, promoted for surviving the fall of Thazar Keep and carrying word of the disaster to his superiors.

The same accomplishment, if one was generous enough to call it that, made him the man of choice to scout the enemy's movements, and he'd spent some time doing precisely that. Now it was time to report to the tharchion. Aware of his business, the sentry standing watch in front of the tent admitted him without a challenge.

Currently clad in the sort of quilted tunic warriors employed to keep their own metal armor from bruising their limbs, Nymia Focar, governor of Pyarados, was a handsome woman with a wide, sensuous mouth, several silver rings in each ear, and a stud in the left side of her nose. As he saluted, she said, "Griffon rider!

After your errand, you must be hungry, or thirsty at the least. Please, refresh yourself." She waved her hand at a folding camp table laden with bottles of wine, a loaf of bread, green grapes, white and yellow cheeses, and ham.

Her cordiality didn't surprise him. She was often friendly and informal with her underlings, even to the point of taking them into her bed, though Aoth had never received such a summons. Perhaps his blunt features and short, thick frame were to blame. In any case, he was just as happy to be excused. Nymia had a way of turning into a ferocious disciplinarian when she encountered a setback, sometimes even flogging soldiers who'd played no part in whatever had gone amiss. He'd noticed that in such instances, it was often her former lovers who wound up tied to the whipping post.

"Thank you, Tharchion." He was hungry, but not enough to

essay the awkwardness of reporting and shoving food into his mouth at the same time. A drink seemed manageable, however, certainly safer than the risk of giving offense by spurning her hospitality, and he poured wine into one of the pewter goblets provided for the purpose. In the lamp-lit tent, the red vintage looked black. "I scouted the pass as ordered. Hundreds of undead are marching down the valley, in good order and on our side of the river."

It was what she'd expected to hear, and she nodded. "Why in the name of the all-devouring flame is this happening?"

"I can only repeat what others have speculated already. There are old Raumviran strongholds, and the ruins of a kingdom even older up in the mountains. Both peoples apparently ttafficked with abyssal powers, and such realms leave ghosts behind when they pass away."

As Thay with its hosts of wizards conducting esoteric experiments would leave its stain when it passed, he reflected, then wondered where the morbid thought had come from.

"Once in a while," he continued, "something skulks down from the ancient forts and tombs to trouble us, but we've never seen a horde the size of this, and I have no idea why it's occurring now. Perhaps a true scholar might, but I'm just a battle mage."

She smiled. "I wouldn't trade you. Destroying the foul things is more important than understanding precisely where they came from or what agitated them. Is it your opinion that they intend to march straight through to engage us?"

"Yes, Tharchion." He took a sip of his wine. It was sweeter than he liked but still drinkable. Probably it was costly and exquisite, if only he possessed the refined palate to appreciate it.

"Even though they can't reach us before dawn?"

"Yes."

"Good. In that case, we'll have the advantages of a well-established position, daylight, and the Thazarim protecting

our right flank. Perhaps the creatures aren't as intelligent as we first thought."

Aoth hesitated. Wizard and griffon rider though he was, he was wary of seeming to contradict his capricious commander, but it was his duty to share his perspective. It was why they were talking, after all.

"They seemed intelligent when they took Thazar Keep."

"Essentially," Nymia said, "they had the advantage of surprise. Your warning came too late to do any good. Besides, the warriors of the garrison were the least able in the tharch. I sent them to that posting because no one expected anything to happen there."

He didn't much like hearing her disparage men who had, for the most part, fought bravely and died horrific deaths in her service, but he was prudent enough not to say so. "I understand what you're saying, Tharchion. I just think it's important we remember that the enemy has organization and leadership. I told you about the nighthaunt."

"The faceless thing with the horns and wings."

"Yes." Though he hadn't known what to call it until a mage more learned than himself had told him. "A form of powerful undead generally believed extinct. I had the feeling it was the leader, or an officer at least."

"If it impressed a griffon rider, I'm sure it's nasty, but I have all the warriors I could gather on short notice and every priest I could haul out of his shrine. We'll smash this foe, never doubt it."

"I don't, Tharchion." Truly he didn't, or at least he knew he shouldn't. Her analysis of the tactical situation appeared sound, and he trusted in the valor and competence of his comrades. Maybe it was simply fatigue or his memories of the massacre at Thazar Keep that had afflicted him with this edgy, uncharacteristic sense of foreboding. "What will you do if the undead decide to stop short of engaging us?"

"Then we'll advance and attack them. With any luck at all, we should be able to do it before sunset. I want this matter

finished quickly, the pass cleared and Thazar Keep retaken. Until they are, no gems or ores can come down from the mines, and there won't be any treasure hunters heading up into the peaks for us to tax."

Nor safety or fresh provisions for any miners, trappers, and crofters who yet survive in the vale, Aoth thought. She's right; it is important to crush this enemy quickly.

"Do you have anything else to report?" Nymia asked.

He took a moment to consider "No, Tharchion."

"Go and rest then. I want you fresh when it's time to fight."

He saw to Brightwing's needs, then wrapped himself in his bedroll and attempted to do as his commander had suggested. After a time, he did doze, but he woke with the jangled nerves of one who'd dreamed unpleasant dreams.

It was the bustle of the camp that had roused him to a morning so thoroughly overcast as to mask any trace of the sun in the

eastern sky. Sergeants tramped about shouting. Warriors pulled and strapped on their armor, lined up before the cooks' cauldrons for a ladle full of porridge, kneeled to receive a cleric's blessing, or honed their swords and spears with whetstones. A blood ore, eager for the fight to come, howled its war cry, and donkeys hee-hawed, shied, and pulled at their tethers. A young human soldier attempting to tend the animals wheeled and cursed the ore, and it laughed and made a lewd gesture in response.

Aoth wondered whether an undead spellcaster had sealed away the sun and why no one on his side, a druid or warlock adept at weather-craft, had broken up the cloud cover. If no one could, it seemed a bad omen for the conflict to come.

He spat. He was no great hand at divination and wouldn't know a portent if it crawled up his nose. He was simply nervous, that was all, and the best cure for that was activity.

Accordingly, he procured his breakfast and Brightwing's, performed his meditations and prepared the day's allotment of spells, made sure his weapons and talismans were in

perfect order, then roamed in search of the scouts who had flown out subsequent to his return. He wanted to find out what they'd observed.

As it turned out, nothing of consequence, but the effort kept him occupied until someone shouted that the undead were coming. Then it was time to hurry back to Brightwing, saddle her, and wait for his captain to order him and his comrades aloft.

When the command came, the griffons sprang into the air with a thunderous snapping and clattering of wings. As Brightwing climbed, Aoth studied the enemy. The light of morning, blighted though it was, afforded him a better look than he'd enjoyed hitherto, even when availing himself of his familiar's senses.

It didn't look as if the undead had the Thayan defenders outnumbered. That at least was a relief. Aoth just wished he weren't seeing so many creatures that he, a reasonably well-trained warlock even if no one had ever seen fit to offer him a red robe, couldn't identify. It was easier to fight an adversary if you knew its weaknesses and capabilities.

A hulking, gray-skinned corpse-thing like a monstrously obese ghoul waddled in the front ranks of the undead host. From time to time, its jaw dropped halfway to its navel. It looked like, should it care to, it could stuff a whole human body into its mouth. Aoth scrutinized it, trying to associate it with something, any bit of lore, from his arcane studies, then realized he could no longer see it as clearly as he had a moment before.

The morning was growing darker instead of lighter. The clouds had already crippled the sunlight, and now some power was leeching away what remained. He thought of the night-haunt, a being seemingly made of darkness, and was somehow certain it was responsible. He tried not to shiver.

Every Thayan warrior was accustomed to sorcery and had at least some familiarity with the undead. Still, a murmur of dismay rose from the battle formation below. Officers and

sergeants shouted, reassuring the common soldiers and commanding them to stand fast. Then the enemies on the ground began to lope, and dangerously difficult to discern against the darkened sky, the flying undead hurtled forward. Its rotten wings so full of holes it was a wonder it could stay aloft, the animated corpse of a giant bat flew at Aoth and Brightwing. He decided not to waste a spell on it. He was likely to need every bit of his magic to deal with more formidable foes. Availing himself of their empathic link, he silently told Brightwing to destroy the bat. As the two closed, and at the last possible moment, the griffon lashed her wings, rose above the undead creature, and ripped it with her talons. The bat tumbled down the sky in pieces.

Meanwhile, Aoth cast about for other foes. They were easy enough to find. Brandishing his lance, shouting words of power, he conjured blasts of flame to burn wraiths and shadows from existence until he'd cleansed the air in his immediate vicinity. That afforded him a moment to look and see how the battle as a whole was progressing.

It appeared to him that he and his fellow griffon riders were at least holding their own in the air, while their comrades on the ground might even be gaining the upper hand. Archery had inflicted considerable harm on the advancing undead, and the efforts of the clerics were even more efficacious. Standing in relative safety behind ranks of soldiers, each in his or her own way invoking the power faith afforded, priests of Bane shook their black-gauntleted fists, priestesses of Loviatar scourged their naked shoulders or tore their cheeks with their nails, and servants of Kelemvor in somber gray vestments brandished their hand-and-a-half swords. As a result, some of the undead cringed, unable to advance any further, while others simply crumbled or melted away. Several even turned and attacked their own allies.

It's going to be all right, Aoth thought, smiling. I was a craven to imagine otherwise. But Brightwing, plainly sensing the tenor of Viis thought, rapped, "No. SometYung is about

to happen."

She was tight. In the midst of the Thayan formation, wherever a group of priests stood assembled, patches of air seethed and rippled, then new figures exploded into view. They were diverse in their appearance, and in that first chaotic moment, Aoth couldn't sort them all out, but a number were mere shadows. Others appeared similarly spectral but with blazing emerald eyes, a murky suggestion of swirling robes, and bizarrely, luminous glyphs floating in the air around them. Swarms of insects—undead insects, the griffon rider supposed—hovered among them, along with clouds of sparks that wheeled and surged as if guided by a single will. Figures in hooded cloaks, evidently the ones who'd magically transported their fellow creatures into the center of their enemies, immediately vanished again, perhaps to ferry a second batch.

Aoth had reported that the undead host included at least a few spellcasters, but even so, no one had expected any of their foes to possess the ability to teleport themselves and a group of allies through space, because, as a rule, the undead didn't, and they hadn't revealed it at Thazar Keep. Thus, the maneuver caught the Thayans by surprise.

Yet it didn't panic them. The priests wheeled and rattled off incantations or invoked the pure, simple power of belief to smite the newcomers.

Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Shadows pounced at the priests, sparks and insects swarmed on them, and they went down. Warriors struggled to come to their aid, but there were stinging, burning clouds to engulf them as well, and phantoms to sear them with their touch, and in most cases, they failed even to save themselves. Meanwhile, the bulk of the undead host charged with renewed energy to crash into the shield wall of the living, which immediately began to deform before the pressure.

Perhaps, Aoth thought, he could aid the clerics. He bade



Brightwing swoop lower, but instead of obeying, the griffon lashed her wings and flung herself straight ahead. A moment later, something huge as a dragon plunged through the space they'd just vacated. Aoth hadn't sensed the creature diving at them. He was grateful his familiar had.

The thing leveled out, turned, and climbed to attack again. It was yet another grotesquerie the likes of which Aoth had never encountered before, a creature resembling a giant minotaur with bat wings, fangs, and clawed feet instead of hooves, its whole body shrouded in mummy wrappings.

Brightwing proved more agile in the air and kept away from the enormous thing while Aoth blasted it with bright, booming thunderbolts and darts of light. The punishment stabbed holes in it and burned patches of its body black, but it wouldn't stop coming.

Then Brightwing screeched and lurched in flight. Aoth cast about and couldn't see what ailed her. "My belly!" she cried. He leaned far to the side, relying on the safety straps to keep him from slipping from the saddle. From that position, he could just make out the greenish misty form clinging to her like a leech, its insubstantial hands buried to the wrists in her body, her flesh blistering and suppurating around them.

The angle was as awkward as could be, and Aoth was afraid of striking her instead of his target, but he saw no choice except to try. He triggered the enchantment of accuracy bound in one of his tattoos, and his forearm stung as the glyph gave up its power. He charged his lance with power and thrust.

The point caught the phantom in the flank, and it shriveled from existence. Freed from its crippling, excruciating embrace, Brightwing instantly furled her wings and dived, seeking to evade as she had before.

She failed. The bandaged horror missed the killing strike to the body it had probably intended, but one of its claws pierced her wing.

The undead creature scrabbled at her, trying to achieve a better grip and rend her in the process. Beak snapping, she bit at it. Shouting in fury and terror, Aoth stabbed with his lance.

Finally the huge thing stopped moving. Unfortunately, that meant it fell with its talon still transfixing the griffon's wing, and she and her rider plummeted along with it. For a moment, they were all in danger of crashing to the ground together, but then Btightwing bit completely through the claw, freeing herself. Wings hammering, shaking the severed tip of the talon out of her wound in the process, she leveled off.

Aoth peered about. It was too late to help the priests. They were gone, yet the Thayans on the ground had at least succeeded in eliminating the undead from the midst of their formation, and mages and warriors, all battling furiously, had thus far held back the rest of the undead host. For the next little while, as he and his injured mount did their best to avoid danger, he dared to hope the legions might still carry the day.

Then the surface of the Thazarim churned, and hunched, gaunt shapes waded ashore. They charged the Thayan flank. Aoth cursed. He knew of lacedons, as the aquatic ghouls were called. They were relatively common, but so far as he'd ever heard, they were sea creatures. It made no sense for them to come swimming down from the Sunrise Mountains.

Yet they had, without him or any of the other scouts spotting them in the water, and swarms of undead rats had swum along with them. Like a tide of filthy fur, rotting flesh, exposed bone, and gnashing teeth, the vermin streamed in among the legionnaires, and men who might have stood bravely against any one foe, or even a pair of them, panicked at the onslaught of five or ten or twenty small, scurrying horrors assailing them all at once.

It was the end. The formation began to disintegrate. Warriors turned to run, sometimes throwing away their weapons and

shields. Their leaders bellowed commands, trying to make them retreat with some semblance of order. Slashing with his scimitar, a blood-orc sergeant cut down two members of his squad to frighten the rest sufficiently to heed him.

"Set me down," said Aoth.

"Don't be stupid," Brightwing replied.

"I won't take you back into the middle of that, hurt as you are, but none of the men on the ground is going to escape unless every wizard we have left does all he can to cover the retreat."

"We haven't fallen out of the sky, have we? I can still fly and fight. We'll do it together."

He discerned he had no hope of talking her out of it. "All right, have it your way."

Brightwing maneuvered, and when necessary, she battled with talon and beak to keep them both alive. He used every spell in his head and every trace of magic he carried bound in an amulet, scroll, or tattoo to hold the enemy back. To no avail, he suspected, because below him, moment by moment, men were dying anyway.

Then, however, the morning brightened. The clouds turned from slate to a milder gray, a luminous white spot appeared in the east, and at last the undead faltered in their harrying pursuit.

Ysval could bear the touch of daylight without actual harm, yet it made his skin crawl, and soaring above his host, the better to survey the battle, he stiffened in repugnance.

Some of his warriors froze or flinched, their reaction akin to his own. Specters faded to invisibility, to mere impotent memories of pain and hate. Still other creatures began to smolder and steam and hastily shrouded themselves in their graveclothes or scrambled for shade.

Ysval closed his pallid eyes and took stock of himself. His assessment, though it came as no surprise, was disappointing. For the moment, he lacked the mystical strength to darken the day a second time.

The nighthaunt called in his silent voice. He'd made a point of establishing a psychic bond with each of his lieutenants and so was confident they'd hear. Sure enough, the ones who were still functional immediately moved to call back those undead so avid to kill that they'd continued to chase Tharchion Focar's fleeing troops even when their comrades faltered.

Once Ysval was certain his minions were enacting his will, he swooped lower, the better to provide the direction the host would

require in the aftermath of battle. Several of his officers saw him descending and hurried to meet him where, with a final snap of his wings, he set down on the ground.

He gazed at Shex, inviting her to speak first, in part because he respected her. In fact, though blessedly incapable of affection in any weak mortal sense, he privately regarded her as something of a kindred spirit, but not because they particularly resembled one another.

Like himself, she had wings and claws, but she was taller, tall as an ogre in fact, and her entire body was a mass of peeling and deliquescent corruption. Slime oozed perpetually down her frame to pool at her feet, and even other undead were careful to stand clear of the corrosive filth.

No, Ysval felt a certain bond with her because each of them was more than just a formidable and genuinely sentient undead creature. Each was the avatar, the embodiment, of a cosmic principle. As he was darkness, so she was decay.

At the moment, she was also unhappy. "Many of our warriors can function in the light," she said in her slurred, muddled voice. "Let those who are capable continue the pursuit. Why not? The legionnaires won't turn and fight."

They might, he replied, if they think it's the only alternative to being struck down from behind. He'd noticed that even many undead winced and shuddered when he shared his thoughts with them, but she bore the psychic intrusion

without any sign of distress. We've won enough for one day. We've dealt a heavy blow to the enemy, and the pass, our highway onto the central plateau, lies open from end to end. Which meant that for a time at least, the host would disperse to facilitate the process of laying waste to as much of eastern Thay as possible. In a way, it was a pity. It had been millennia since he'd commanded an army, and he realized now that he'd missed it.

Still, raiding, slaughtering helpless humans and putting their farms and villages to the torch, was satisfying in its own right, and he had reason for optimism that the army would join together again by and by. It was just that the decision didn't rest with him but with the master who'd summoned him back to the mortal realm after a sojourn of ages on the Plane of Shadow.

Shex inclined her head. Viscous matter dripped from her face as if she were weeping over his decision. "As you command," she said.

Her sullen tone amused him. I promise, he said, there's plenty more killing to come. Now, see to the corpses of the tharchion's soldiers. The ghouls and such can feed on half of them, but I want the rest intact for reanimation.

#### Chapter five

25 Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Surthay, capital of the tharch of the same name, was a crude sort of place compared to Eltabbar, and since the town lay outside the enchantments that managed the climate in central Thay, the weather was colder and rainier. Even murky Lake Mulsantir, the body of water on which it sat, suffered by comparison with the blue depths of Lake Thaylambar.

Yet Malark Springhill liked the place. At times the luxuries, splendors, and intricacies of life at Dmitra Flass's court grew wearisome for a man who'd spent much of his life in the rough-and-tumble settlements of the Moonsea. When he was in such a mood, the dirt streets, simple wooden houses, and

thatch-roofed shacks of a town like Surthay felt more like home than Eltabbar ever could.

That didn't mean he could dawdle here. He didn't understand the urgency of his errand, but his mistress seemed to think it important and he didn't intend to keep her waiting any longer

than necessary. He'd finish his business and ride out tonight, and with luck he could complete the wearisome "Long Portage" back up the First Escarpment before the end of tomorrow.

He headed down the rutted, dung-littered street. This particular thoroughfare, a center for carnal entertainments, was busy even after dark, and he made way repeatedly for soldiers, hunters, fishermen, pimps, and tough-looking locals of every stripe—for anyone who looked more dangerous and intimidating than a smallish, neatly dressed, clerkish fellow armed only with a knife.

Only once did he resent stepping aside, and that was when everyone else did it too, clearing the way for a legionnaire marching a dozen skeleton warriors along. Malark detested the undead, which he supposed made it ironic that he owed his allegiance to a princess who in turn had pledged her fealty to a lich, but serving Dmitra Flass afforded him a pleasant life and plenty of opportunity to pursue his own preoccupations.

He stepped inside a crowded tavern, raucous with noise and stinking of beer and sweaty bodies. A legionnaire turned and gave him a sneer.

"This is a soldier's tavern," he said.

"I know," Malark replied. "I came to show my admiration for the heroes who saved Surthay from the Rashemi." He lifted a fat purse and shook it to make it clink. "I think this is enough to stand the house a few rounds."

He was welcome enough after that, and the soldiers were eager to spin tales of their valor. As he'd expected, much of what they told him was nonsense. They couldn't all have

slain Rashemi chieftains or butchered half a dozen berserkers all by themselves, and he was reasonably certain no one had raped one of the infamous witches.

Yet it should be possible to sift through all the boasts and lies and discern the essence of what had happened buried beneath.

Malark listened, drew his inferences, and decided further inquiries were in order, inquiries best conducted elsewhere and by different methods.

Stiffening and swallowing, he feigned a sudden attack of nausea and stumbled outside, ostensibly to vomit. Since he left his pigskin pouch of silver and copper coins behind on the table, he was reasonably certain no one would bother to come looking for him when he failed to return.

He found a shadowy recessed doorway and settled himself to wait, placing himself in a light trance that would help him remain motionless. Warriors passed by his hiding place, sometimes in groups, sometimes in the company of painted whores, sometimes young, sometimes staggering drunk. He let them all drift on unmolested.

Finally a lone legionnaire came limping down the street. By the looks of it, an old wound or fracture in his leg had never healed properly. Though he was past his prime, with a frame that had once been athletic and was now running to fat, he wore no medallion, plume, or other insignia of rank, and was evidently still a common man-at-arms.

He didn't look intoxicated, either. Perhaps he'd just come off duty and was heading for the same soldier's tavern Malark had visited.

In any case, whatever his business, he appeared perfect for Malark's purposes. The spy waited until the legionnaire was just a few paces away, then stepped forth from the shadows. Startled, the legionnaire jumped back, and his hand darted to the hilt of his broadsword. Then he hesitated, confused, perhaps, by the contradiction between the menace implicit in Malark's sudden emergence and the innocuous

appearance of his empty hands and general demeanor. It gave the spy the opportunity to step closer.

"What do you want?" the soldier demanded.

"Answers," Malark replied.

That was apparently enough to convince the warrior he was in trouble. He started to snatch the sword out, but he'd waited too long. Before it could clear the scabbard, Malark sprang in and slammed the heel of his hand into the center of the other man's forehead. The legionnaire's leather helmet thudded, no doubt absorbing part of the force of the impact. Not enough of it, though, and his knees buckled. Malark caught him and dragged him into the narrow, lightless space between two houses.

When he judged he'd gone far enough from the street that he and his prisoner would remain unobserved, he set the legionnaire down on the ground, relieved him of his sword and dirk, and held a vial of smelling salts under his nose. Rousing, the warrior twisted away from the vapors.

"Are you all right?" Malark asked, straightening up. "It can be tricky to hit a man hard enough to stun him, but not so hard that you do any real harm. I like to think I have the knack, but armor makes it more difficult."

"I'll kill you," the soldier growled.

"Try if you like," Malark said and waited to see if the prisoner would dive for the sword or dagger now resting on the ground beyond his reach or attack with his bare hands.

He opted for the latter. Wishing the space between the buildings weren't quite so narrow, Malark nonetheless managed to shift to the side when the captive surged up and hurled himself forward. He tripped the legionnaire then, while the other man was floundering off balance, caught hold of his arm and twisted, applying pressure to the shoulder socket. The warrior gasped at the pain.

"We're going to have a civil conversation," said Malark. "The only question is, do I need to dislocate your arm to make it happen, or are you ready to cooperate now?"



As best he was able, the legionnaire struggled, trying to break free. Malark applied more pressure, enough to paralyze the man.

"I really will do it," said the spy, "and then I'll go on damaging you until you see reason."

"All right!" the soldier gasped.

Malark released him. "Sit or stand as you prefer."

The bigger man chose to stand and rub his shoulder. "Who in the Nine Hells are you?"

"My name is Malark Springhill. I do chores of various sorts for Tharchion Flass."

The legionnaire hesitated, his eyes narrowing. Perhaps he'd never risen in the ranks, but he was evidently more intelligent than that fact would seem to imply. "You . . . are you supposed to tell me that?"

"Ordinarily, no," Malark replied. Out on the street, a woman laughed, the sound strident as a raptot's screech. "I'm a spy among othet things, and generally I have to lie to people all the time, about . . . well, evetything, really. It's something of a luxury that I can be honest with you."

"Because you mean to kill me."

"Yes. I'm going to ask you what truly happened in the Gorge of Gauros, and I couldn't let you survive to report that anyone was interested in that even if you didn't know who sent me to inquire. But you get to decide how pleasant the next little while will be, and how you'll die at the end of it.

"You can try withholding the information I want," Malark continued, "in which case, I'll torture it out of you. Afterwards, your body will be broken, incapable of resistance when I snap your neck.

"Ot you can answer me freely, and I'll have no reason to hurt you. Once you've given me what I need, I'll return yout blades, permit you to unsheathe them, and we'll fight. You're a

legionnaire. Surely you'd prefer the honor of a warrior's death, and I'd like to give it to you."

The legionnaire stared at him. "You're crazy."

"People often say that, but they're mistaken." Malark decided to confide in the warrior. It was one technique for building trust between interrogator and prisoner, and besides, he rarely had the chance to tell his story. "I just see existence in a way others can't.

"A long, long while ago, I learned of a treasure. The sole surviving dose of a philter to keep a man from aging forever after.

"I coveted it. So did others. In those days, I scarcely knew the rudiments of fighting, but I had a friend who was proficient, and together we bested our rivals and seized the prize. We'd agreed we'd each drink half the potion, and thus, though neither of us would become immortal, we'd both live a long time."

"But you betrayed him," said the legionnaire, "and drank it all yourself."

Malark smiled. "Are you saying that because you're a good judge of character, or because it's what you would have done? Either way, you're right. That's exactly what I did, and later on, I started to regret it.

"First, I watched everyone I loved, everyone I even knew, pass away. That's hard. I wept when my former friend died a feeble old man, and he'd spent the past fifty years trying to revenge himself on me.

"I attempted to move forward. I told myself there was a new generation of people to care about. The problem, of course, was that before long, in the wink of an eye, or so it seemed, they died, too.

"When I grew tired of enduring that, I tried living with dwarves and later, elves, but it wasn't the same as living with my own kind, and in time, they passed away just like humans. It simply took a little longer."

The soldier gaped at him. "How old are you?"

"Older than Thay. I recall hearing the tidings that the Red Wizards had fomented a rebellion against Mulhorand,

though I wasn't in these parts to witness it myself. Anyway, over time, I pretty much lost the ability to feel an attachment to individual people, for what was the point? Instead, I tried to embrace causes and places, only to discover those die too. I lost count of the times I gave my affection to one or another town along the Moonsea, only to see the place sacked and the inhabitants massacred. I learned that as the centuries roll by, even gods change, or at least our conception of them does, which amounts to the same thing if you're looking for some constancy to cling to.

"But eventually I realized there was one constant, and that was death. In its countless variations, it was happening all around me, all the time. It befell everyone, or at least, everyone but me, and that made it fascinating."

"If you're saying you wanted to die, why didn't you just stick a dagger into your heart or jump off a tower? Staying young forever isn't the same thing as being unkillable, is it?"

"No, it isn't, and I've considered ending my life on many occasions, but something has always held me back. Early on, it was the same dread of death that prompted me to strive for the elixir and betray my poor friend in the first place. After I made a study of extinction, I shed the fear, but with enlightenment, suicide came to seem like cheating, or at the very least, bad manners. Death is a gift, and we aren't meant to reach out and snatch it. We're supposed to wait until the universe is generous enough to bestow it on us."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry about it. Most people don't, but the Monks of the Long Death do, and there came a day when I was fortunate enough to stumble across one of their hidden enclaves and gain admission as a novice."

The legionnaire blanched. "You're one of those madmen?"

"It depends on your point of view. After a decade or two, paladins descended on the monastery and slaughtered my brothers and sisters. Only I escaped, and afterward, I didn't feel the need to search for another such stronghold. I'd

already learned what I'd hoped to, and the rigors and abstentions of the ascetic life had begun to wear on me.

"According to the rules of the order, I'm an apostate, and if they ever realize it, they'll likely try to kill me. But though I no longer hold a place in the hierarchy, I still adhere to the teachings. I still believe that while all deaths are desirable, some are better than others. The really good ones take a form appropriate to the victim's life and come to him in the proper season. I believe it's both a duty and the highest form of art to arrange such passings as opportunity allows.

"That's why I permitted younger, healthier, more successful men to pass by and accosted you instead. It's why I hope to give you a fighter's death."

"What are you talking about? It's not my 'season' to die!"

"Are you sure? Isn't it plain your best days are past? Doesn't your leg ache constantly? Don't you feel old age working its claws into you? Aren't you disappointed with the way your life has turned out? Why not let it go then? The priests and philosophers assure us that something better waits beyond."

"Shut up! You can't talk me into wanting to die."

"I'm not trying. Not exactly. I told you, I want you to go down fighting. I just don't want you to be afraid."

"I'm not! Or at least I won't be if you keep your promise and give back my sword."

"I will. I'll return your blades and fight you empty-handed."

"Ask your cursed questions, then, and I'll answer honestly. Why shouldn't I, when you'll never have a chance to repeat what I say to Dmitra Flass or anybody else?"

"Thank you." The inquisition didn't take long. At the end, though Malark had learned a good deal he hadn't comprehended before, he still wasn't sure why it was truly important, but he realized he'd come to share his mistress's suspicion that it was.

Now, however, was not the time to ponder the matter. He needed to focus on the duel to come. He backed up until the sword and dagger lay between the legionnaire and himself.

"Pick them up," he said.

The soldier sprang forward, crouched, and grabbed the weapons without taking his eyes off Malark. He then scuttled backward as he drew the blades, making it more difficult for his adversary to spring and prevent him had he cared to do so, and opening enough distance to use a sword to best effect.

Malark noticed the limp was no longer apparent. Evidently excitement, or the single-minded focus of a veteran combatant, masked the pain, and when the bigger man came on guard, his stance was as impeccable as a woodcut in a manual of arms.

Given his level of skill, he deserved to be a drill instructor at the very least. Malark wondered whether it was a defect in his character or simple bad luck that had kept him in the ranks. He'd never know, of course, for the time for inquiry was past.

The legionnaire sidled left, hugging the wall on that side. He obviously remembered how Malark had shifted past him before and was positioning himself in such a way that, if his adversary attempted such a maneuver again, he could only dart in one direction. That would make it easier to defend against the move.

Then the warrior edged forward. Malark stood and waited. As soon as the distance was to the legionnaire's liking, when a sword stroke would span it but not a punch or a kick, he cut at Malark's head.

Or rather, he appeared to. He executed the feint with all the necessary aggression, yet even so, Malark perceived that a false

attack was all it was. He couldn't have said exactly how. Over the centuries, he'd simply developed an instinct for such things.

He lifted an arm as if to block the cut, in reality to convince the legionnaire his trick was working. The blade spun low and chop at his flank.

Malark shifted inside the arc of the blow, a move that robbed the stroke of much of its force. When he swept his arm down to defend, the forte of the blade connected with his forearm but failed to shear through the sturdy leather bracer hidden under his sleeve.

At the same moment, he stiffened his other hand and drove his fingertips into the hard bulge of cartilage at the front of the warrior's throat. The legionnaire reeled backward. Malark took up the distance and hit him again, this time with a chop to the side of the neck. Bone cracked and, his head flopping, the soldier collapsed.

Malark regarded the body with the same mix of satisfaction and wistful envy he usually felt at such moments. Then he closed the legionnaire's eyes and walked away.

North of the Surag River, the road threaded its way up the narrow strip of land between Lake Thaylambar to the west and the Surague Escarpment, the cliffs at the base of the Sunrise Mountains, to the east. The land was wilder, heath interspersed with stands of pine and dotted with crumbling ruined towers, and sparsely settled. The slaves and their keepers marched an entire morning without seeing anyone, and when someone finally did appear, it was just a lone goatherd, who, wary of strangers, immediately scurried into a thicket. Even tax stations, the ubiquitous fortresses built to collect tolls and help preserve order throughout the realm, were few and far between.

Tammith had never before ventured farther than a day's walk from Bezantur, but she'd heard that the northern half of Thay was almost all alike, empty, undeveloped land where even freemen found it difficult to eke out a living. How much more difficult, then, must it be to endure as a slave, particularly one accustomed to the teeming cities of the south?

Thus she understood why so many of her fellow thralls grew more sullen and despondent with each unwilling step they took, and why Yuldra, the girl she'd sought to comfort just

before the Red Wizards came and bought the lot of them, kept sniffing and knuckling her reddened eyes. In her heart, Tammith felt just as dismayed and demoralized as they did. But she also believed that if one surrendered to such emotions, they would only grow stronger, so she squeezed Yuldra's shoulder and said, "Come on, don't cry. It's not so bad."

Yuldra's face twisted. "It is."

"This country is strange to me, too, but I'm sure they have towns somewhere in the north, and remember, the men who bought us are Red Wizards. You don't think they live in a tent out in the wilderness, do you?"

"You don't know that they're taking us where they live," the adolescent retorted, "because they haven't said. I've had other masters, and they weren't so close-mouthed. I'm scared we're going somewhere horrible."

"I'm sure that isn't so." In reality, of course, Tammith had no way of being certain of any such thing, but it seemed the right thing to say. "Let's not allow our imaginings to get the best of us. Let's play another game."

Yuldra sighed. "All right."

The next phase of their journey began soon after, when they finally left the northernmost reaches of Lake Thaylambar behind, and rolling plains opened before them. To Tammith's surprise, the procession then left the road where, though she eventually spotted signs that others had passed this way before them, there was no actual trail of any sort.

Nor did there appear to be anything ahead but rolling grassland, and beyond that, visible as a blurry line on the horizon, High Thay, the mountainous tharch that jutted upward from the central plateau as it in turn rose abruptly from the lowlands. From what she understood, many a Red Wizard maintained a private citadel or estate among the peaks, no doubt with hordes of slaves to do his bidding, but her sense of geography, hazy though it was, suggested the procession wasn't heading there. If it was, the warlocks had

taken about the most circuitous route imaginable.

Suddenly three slaves burst from among their fellows and ran, scattering as they fled. Tammith's immediate reflexive thought was that, unlike Yuldra and herself, the trio had figured out where they all were going.

Unfortunately, they had no hope of escaping that fate. The Red Wizards could have stopped them easily with spells, but they didn't bother. Like their masters, some of the guards were mounted, and they pounded after the fugitives. One warrior flung a net as deftly as any fisherman she'd ever watched plying his trade in the waters off Bezantur, and a fugitive fell tangled in the mesh. Another guard reached out and down with his lance, slipped it between a thrall's legs, and tripped him. A third horseman leaned out of the saddle, snatched a handful of his target's streaming, bouncing mane of hair and simply jerked the runaway off his feet.

Once the guards herded the fugitives back to the procession, every slave had to suffer his masters' displeasure. The overseers screamed and spat in their faces, slapped, cuffed, and shoved them, and threatened savage punishments for all if anyone else misbehaved. Yuldra broke down sobbing the moment a warrior approached her. The Red Wizards looked vexed and impatient with the delay the exercise in discipline required.

The abuse was still in progress when Tammith caught sight of a horseman galloping steadily nearer. His wheat-blond hair gleamed dully in the late afternoon sunlight, and something about the set of his shoulders and the way he carried himself—

Yes! Perhaps she shouldn't jump to conclusions when he was still so far away, but in her heart she knew. It was Bareris, after she'd abandoned all hope of ever seeing him again.

She wanted to cry his name, run to meet him, until she realized, with a cold and sudden certainty, that what she really ought to do was warn him off.

Outside in the streets of Eltabbar, the celebration had an



edge to it. The mob was happy enough to gobble free food, guzzle free ale and wine, and watch the parades, dancers, mummers, displays of transmutation, and other forms of entertainment, all of it provided to celebrate the election of Samas Kul to the office of zulkit. Yet Aoth had felt the underlying displeasure and dismay at the tidings that in the east, a Thayan army had met defeat, and in consequence, undead marauders were laying waste to the countryside. He suspected the festival would erupt into rioting after nightfall.

Still, he would rather have been outside in the gathering storm than tramping at Nymia Focar's side through the immense basalt ziggurat called the Flaming Brazier, reputedly the largest temple of Kossuth the Firelord in all the world. That was because it was entirely possible that the potentate who'd summoned the tharchion had done so with the intention of placing the blame for the recent debacle in Pyarados. Since she, the commander who'd lost to the undead, was the obvious candidate, perhaps she'd dragged Aoth along to be scapegoat in her place.

Maybe, he thought, he even deserved it. If only he'd spotted the lacedons—

He scowled the thought away. He hadn't been the only scout in the air, and nobody else had seen the creatures either. Nor could you justly condemn anyone for failing to anticipate an event that had never happened before.

Not that justice was a concept that automatically sprang to mind where zulkirs and Red Wizards were concerned.

Aoth and his superior strode in dour silence through yellow and orange high-ceilinged chambers lit by countless devotional fires. The heat of the flames became oppressive, and the wizard evoked the magic of a tattoo to cool himself. Nymia lacked the ability to do the same, and perspiration gleamed on her upper lip.

Eventually they arrived at high double doors adorned with a scene inlaid in jewels and precious metals: Kossuth, spiked

chain in hand, smiting his great enemy Istishia, King of the Water Elementals. A pair of warrior monks stood guard at the sides of the portal and swung the leaves open to permit the new arrivals to enter the room beyond.

It was a chamber plainly intended for discussion and disputation, though it too had its whispering altar flames glinting on golden icons. Seated around a table in the center of the room was a more imposing gathering of dignitaries than Aoth had ever seen before even at a distance, let alone close up. Let alone taking any notice of his own humble existence. In fact, four of the five were zulkirs.

Gaunt, dark-eyed Szass Tam, his withered fingers folded, looked calm and composed.

Yaphyll, zulkir of Divination and by all accounts the lich's most reliable ally, was a slender woman, somewhat short for a Mulan, with, rather to Aoth's surprise, a humorous, impish cast of expression manifest even on this grave occasion. She looked

just a little older than he was, thirty or so, but she had actually held her office since before he was born with magic maintaining her youth.

In contrast, Lallara, zulkir of Abjuration, though still seemingly hale and vital, evidently disdained the cosmetic measures which might have kept time from etching lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth and softening the flesh beneath her chin. Scowling, she toyed with one of her several rings, twisting it around and around her forefinger.

Astonishingly obese, his begemmed robes the gaudiest and plainly the costliest of the all the princely raiment on display, Samas Kul likewise appeared restless. Perhaps he disliked being called away from the celebration of his rise to a zulkir's preeminence, or maybe the newly minted mage-lord was worried he wouldn't make a good impression here at the onset of his new responsibilities and so lose the respect of his peers.

Rounding out the assembly was Iphegor Nath. Few indeed

were the folk who could treat with zulkirs on anything even approximating an equal footing, but the High Flamelord, primate of Kossuth's church, was one of them. Craggy and burly, he wore bright orange vestments, the predominant hue close enough to forbidden red that no man of humbler rank would have dared to put it on. His eyes were orange as well, with a fiery light inside them, and from moment to moment tiny flames crawled on his shoulders, arms, and shaven scalp without burning his garments or blistering his skin. His air of sardonic composure was a match for Szass Tarn's.

Nymia and Aoth dropped to their knees and lowered their gazes.

"Rise," said Szass Tam, "and seat yourselves at the table."

"Is that necessary?" Lallara rapped. "I'm not pleased with the tharchion, and her lieutenant doesn't even wear red. By the looks of him, he isn't even Mulan."

"It will make it easier for us all to converse," the lich replied, "and if we see fit to punish them later, I doubt that the fact that we allowed them to sit down first will dilute the effect." His black eyes shifted back to Nymia and Aoth, and he waved a shriveled hand at two vacant chairs. "Please."

Aoth didn't want to sit or do anything else that might elicit Lallara's displeasure, but neither, of course, could he disobey Szass Tam. Feeling trapped, he pulled the chair out and winced inwardly when the legs grated on the floor.

"Now, then," said Szass Tam, "with the gracious permission of His Omniscience"—he inclined his head to Iphegor Nath—"I called you all here to address the situation in Tharchion Focar's dominions. It's serious, or so I've been given to understand."

"Yet evidently not serious enough," the High Flamelord drawled, "to warrant an assembly of all eight zulkirs. To some, it might even appear that you, Your Omnipotence, wanted to meet here in the temple instead of your own citadel to avoid the notice of those you chose to exclude."

Yaphyll smiled a mischievous smile. "Perhaps it was purely out of respect for you, Your Omniscience. We came to you rather than put you to the inconvenience of coming to us."

Iphegor snorted. Blue flame oozed from his hand onto the tabletop, and he squashed it out with a fingertip before it could char the finish.

"You're correct, of course," Szass Tam told the priest. "Regrettably, we zulkirs fall into two camps, divided by our differing perspectives on trade and other issues, and of late, our squabbles have grown particularly contentious, perhaps even to the point of assassination. That makes it slow going to accomplish anything when we all attempt to work together, and since this particular problem is urgent, I thought a more efficient approach was required."

"Besides which," Iphegor said, "if you resolve the problem without involving your peers, you'll reap all the benefits of success. The nobles and such will be that much more inclined to give their support to you in preference to Aznar Thrul's cabal."

"Just so," said Samas Kul in a plummy, unctuous voice. "You've demonstrated you're a shrewd man, Your Omniscience, not that any of us ever imagined otherwise. The question is, if we score a hit in the game we're playing with our rivals, will that trouble or displease you?"

"It might," the primate said. "By convening here in the Flaming Brazier and including me among your company, you've made me your collaborator. Now it's possible I'll have to contend with the rancor of your opponents."

"Yet you agreed to meet with us," Lallara said.

Iphegor shrugged. "I was curious, I hoped something would come of it to benefit the faith, and I too understand that Pyarados needs immediate attention."

"Masters!" Nymia said. All eyes shifted to her, and she faltered as if abruptly doubting the wisdom of speaking unbidden, but now that she'd started, she had no choice but to continue. "With all respect, you speak as if Pyarados is

lost, and that isn't so. The undead seized one minor fortress and won one additional battle."

"With the result," snapped Lallara, "that they're now devastating your tharch and could easily range farther west to trouble the entire plateau."

"The ghouls have overrun a few farms," Nymia insisted, the sweat on her face gleaming in the firelight. "I still hold Pyarados,"—Aoth realized she was referring specifically to the capital city of her province—"and I've sent to Tharchion Daramos for assistance. He's bringing fresh troops from Thazalhar."

Yaphyll smiled. "Milsantos Daramos is a fine soldier, a winning soldier, and Thazalhar is too small and sparsely populated for a proper tharch. I wonder if it might not be a good idea to

merge it and Pyarados into a single territory and give the old fellow authority over both."

Nymia blanched. "I beg you for one more chance—"

Szass Tam silenced her by holding up his hand. "Let's not rush ahead of ourselves. I'd like to hear a full account of the events in the east before we decide what to do about them."

"Aoth Fezim," Nymia said, "is the only man to survive the fall of Thazar Keep. For that reason, I brought him to tell the first part of the story."

Aoth related it as best he could, without trying to inflate his own valor or importance. He made sure, though, that the others understood he'd fled only when the castellan had ordered it and not out of cowardice.

Then Nymia told of the battle at the west end of the pass, justifying her defeat as best she could. That involved explaining that forms of undead had appeared whose existence Aoth had not reported and that neither he nor the other scouts had noticed the creatures swimming beneath the surface of the river. The griffon rider wasn't sure if she was actually implying that he was responsible for everything that had gone wrong or if it was simply his trepidation that

made it seem that way.

When she finished, Szass Tam studied Aoth's face. "Do you have anything to add to your commander's account?" he asked.

Partly out of pride, partly because he was all but certain it would only move the zulkirs to scorn, Aoth resisted the urge to offer excuses. "No, Your Omnipotence. That's the way it happened."

The lich nodded. "Well, obviously, victorious soldiers inspire more trust than defeated ones, yet I wouldn't call either of you incompetent, and I don't see a benefit to replacing you with warriors who lack experience fighting this particular incursion. I'm inclined to keep you in your positions for the time being at least, provided, of course, that everyone else is in accord." He glanced about at the other zulkirs.

As Aoth expected, none of the others took exception to their faction leader's opinion, though Lallara's assent had a sullen quality to it. Rumor had it that, willful, erratic, and unpredictable, she was less firmly of the lich's party than the faithful Yaphyll and was something of a creative artist in the field of torture as well. Perhaps she'd been looking forward to inflicting some ingeniously gruesome chastisement on Nymia, her subordinate, or both.

"Now that I've heard Tharchion Focar's report," Iphegor said, "I understand what's happening but not why. I'd appreciate it if someone could enlighten me on that point." He turned his smoldering gaze on Yaphyll. "Perhaps you, Your Omnipotence, possess some useful insights."

Aoth understood why the high priest had singled her out. She was, after all, the zulkir of Divination. Uncovering secrets was her particular art.

She gave the High Flamelord a rueful, crooked smile. "You shame me, Your Omniscience. I can repeat the same speculations we've already passed back and forth until our tongues are numb: We're facing an unpleasantness that one of the vanished kingdoms of the Sunrise Mountains left

behind. Despite the best efforts of my order, I can't tell you precisely where the undead horde originated or why it decided to strike at this particular time. You're probably aware that, for better or worse, it's difficult to use divination to find out about anything occurring in central Thay. Jealous of their privacy, too many wizards have cast enchantments to deflect such efforts. When my subordinates and I try to investigate the undead raiders, we meet with the same sort of resistance, as if they have similar wards in place."

Lallara sneered. "So far, this has all been wonderfully productive. Even a zulkir has nothing to offer beyond excuses for ineptitude."

If the barb stung Yaphyll, she opted not to show it. "I will say I'm not astonished that ancient spirits are stirring. The omens indicate we live in an age of change and turmoil. The great Rage of Dragons two years ago was but one manifestation of a sort of universal ferment likely to continue for a while."

Iphegor nodded. "On that point, Your Omnipotence, your seers and mine agree." He smiled like a beast baring its fangs. "Let us give thanks that so much is to butn and likewise embrace our task, which is to make sure it's the corrupt and unworthy aspects of our existence which go to feed the purifying flames."

"Can we stay focused on killing this nighthaunt and its followers?" Lallara asked. "I assume they qualify as 'corrupt and unworthy.'"

"I would imagine so," said Szass Tam, "and that's our purpose here today: to formulate a strategy. Tharchion Focar has made a beginning by sending to Thazalhar for reinforcements. How can we augment her efforts?"

Samas Kul shrugged his blubbery shoulders. The motion made the tentlike expanse of his gorgeous robes glitter and flash with reflected firelight. "Give her some more troops, I suppose."

"Yes," said the lich, "we can provide some, but we must also

recognize our limitations. We reduced the size of our armies after the new policy of trade and peace proved successful. The legions of the north just fought a costly engagement against the Rashemi. Tharchions Kren and Odesseiron need to rebuild their forces and to hold their positions in case of another incursion. I don't think it prudent to pull warriors away from the border we share with Aglarond either. For all we know, our neighbors to the north and west have conspired to unite against us."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Iphegor Nath.

"We already use our own undead soldiers to fight for us," the lich replied. "The dread warriors, Skeleton Legion, and such. . . . I propose we manufacture more of them. We can disinter folk who died recently enough that the remains are still usable and

lay claim to the corpse of any commoner or thrall who dies from this point forward. I mean, of course, until such time as the crisis is resolved."

"People won't like that," Lallara said. "We Thayans put the dead to use in a way that less sophisticated peoples don't, but that doesn't mean the average person likes the things or wants to see his sweet old granny shuffling around as a zombie." She gave the lich a mocking smile. "No offense."

"None taken," Szass Tam replied blandly. "There are two answers to your objection. The first is that commoners have little choice but to do as we tell them, whether they like it or not. The second is that we'll pay for the cadavers we appropriate. Thanks to the Guild of Foreign Trade, we have plenty of gold."

Samas Kul smirked and preened.

"That may be," said Iphegor, "but it isn't just squeamish commoners who'll object to your scheme. I object. The Firelord objects. It's his will that the bodies of his worshipers be cremated."

"I'm not averse to granting your followers an exemption," said Szass Tam, "provided you're willing to help me in



return."

The priest snorted. "At last we come to it. The reason you included me in your conclave."

"Yes," Szass Tam replied. "I intend to put the order of Necromancy in the forefront of the fight against the marauders. My subordinates won't just supply zombies and skeletons to Tharchion Focar. They'll stand in the battle lines themselves and use their magic to smite the foe. Dealing with the undead is their specialty, after all, so they should acquit themselves admirably, but our forces will prove more formidable still if the church of Kossuth commits itself to the struggle. Pyarados needs warrior priests to exert their special powers versus this sort of threat, and none are more capable than your Burning Braziers."

"According to Tharchion Focar," Iphegor said, "some of the undead apparently possess the ability to strip clerics of their magic. You can understand my reluctance to send my followers into such a situation."

"Ah, yes," said Szass Tam, "the quells. Even the most learned necromancers believed that, like nighthaunts, the last of them perished eons ago, but now that we know of the threat, we can employ countermeasures. We'll guard the priests better—perhaps your orders of militant monks should undertake the task—and arm them better as well, so they're capable of defending themselves even under adverse circumstances."

"Arm them with what?" Iphegor asked.

"With this."

Suddenly a baton of crimson metal reposed in Szass Tam's withered fingers. Though Aoth was looking straight at the zulkir of Necromancy, he had the odd feeling that somehow he'd just missed seeing the rod materialize. Startled, Samas Kul gave a little jerk that set his layers of flab jiggling. Yaphyll smiled at his discomfiture.

"Take it, please," Szass Tam said.

Iphegor accepted the baton which, Aoth now observed, had

stylized tongues of flame etched on its surface. As soon as the primate gripped it, the small flames dancing about his person poured hissing down his arm and over the weapon. The tip of it blazed up as if someone had soaked it in oil. Now it resembled a brightly burning torch, and despite the cooling enchantment of his tattoo, Aoth shrank back slightly from the fierce radiant heat.

"I feel the power in it." The primate rose and brandished the torch in an experimental manner. "What exactly does it do?"

"I'll show you," said Szass Tam, rising, "using these targets."

He waved his hand to indicate the entities now occupying one corner of the room. Aoth hadn't noticed them materializing either, nor had he sensed any telltale fluctuation of magical forces

in his vicinity. Nymia caught her breath in surprise, or alarm.

One of the creatures was a zombielike "dread warrior," an undead soldier still possessed of the martial skills it had mastered in life, its eyes aglow with yellow phosphorescence. The other was some sort of ghost, a bluish transparent shape that flowed and warped from one moment to the next. Its face flickered repeatedly from wholeness to raw, bleeding ruin, as if an invisible knife were cutting away the nose, lips, and eyes in turn. Aoth assumed the display reprised agonies the spirit had suffered while alive.

After his recent experiences, he felt an unreasoning urge to lash out at the undead things with his spells before they could strike at him, but in point of fact, they weren't moving to menace anyone. Szass Tam's magic evidently caged them where they were.

Iphegor gave the lich a glower. "People aren't supposed to be able to translate anything in or out of the temple without my consent."

"I apologize if it seemed disrespectful," said Szass Tam.

"Perhaps later on Lallara can help you improve your wards."

As zulkir of Abjuration, as protective magic was called, she was presumably well suited to the task. "For now, though,

shall we proceed with our demonstration?"

"All right." The high priest extended his arm, aiming the baton as if it were a wizard's wand or a handheld crossbow.

"I assume I point the fiery end at the object of my displeasure."

"Yes. Now focus. Place yourself in the proper frame of mind to cast a spell or chastise undead through sheer force of faith, but you aren't actually going to expend any of your own power. You're simply going to release a measure of what's stored in the rod."

Iphegor snorted. "I do know how to employ a talisman." "Of course. When you're ready, the trigger word is 'Burn.'"

"Burn," Iphegor repeated.

Dazzling flame exploded from the end of the torch to engulf the captive undead. When the flare died a heartbeat later, they were gone as well. The burst had reduced the dread warrior to wisps of ash, while the phantom left no tangible residue whatsoever.

"Impressive," Iphegor conceded.

"Thank you," Szass Tam replied. "The discharge is a mixture of fire and that pure essence of light and life which is poison to undead creatures, and I guarantee you, the Burning Braziers will be able to invoke it as required, even if other magic fails."

"There will still be a significant element of danger, and you still need to give me an adequate reason to put Kossuth's servants in harm's way."

"Concern for the common folk who need your help?" Yaphyll suggested, grinning.

Judging from her scowl, Lallara found the high priest's recalcitrance less amusing. "Szass Tam already offered to exempt your followers from the mandate to surrender their dead."

"True, that's something," the fire priest said, "and so are these torches, which, I assume, the Braziers will keep even when the threat is past. Still, if I'm to throw in with you and

earn the enmity of Thrul and his party, I need more."

"It seems to me," said Szass Tam, "that you're getting it. As we seek ascendancy over our fellow zulkirs, don't you aspire to make the worship of Kossuth the primary faith in the realm?"

"It already is," said Iphegor.

"Granted," said the lich, "but the churches of Bane, Cyric, and Shar are also strong, and in time, one of them could well supplant you. As you and Yaphyll agreed, this is a generation of 'change and turmoil.' We're offering you a chance to guarantee your continued dominance. If your faith receives special treatment from the zulkirs and plays a heroic part in destroying the

menace in Pyarados, new worshipers will flock to your altars.

"Surely that's sufficient incentive," Szass Tam continued.

"Surely it's more important than anything else we could offer, so must you really haggle like a fishwife for additional concessions?"

Iphegor grinned. "It seemed worth a try, but perhaps it is beneath our dignity. All right, I agree to your terms. When the tharchions and your zombies and necromancers march out, the Burning Braziers, Black Flame Zealots, Brothers and Sisters of the Pure Flame, and the Order of the Salamander will march with them."

Szass Tam returned the smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

The council of war broke up a short time later, and left Aoth feeling both relieved and a little dazed. As he and Nymia retraced their steps through the temple, he murmured, "They spoke so freely."

"Because the High Flamelord insisted on candor," the tharchion replied.

"Yes, but they did it in front of us. They could have sent us out of the room when they started talking about their rivalries and politics and all the rest of it, and I wish they had." He chuckled without mirth. "A man who 'doesn't even wear red' doesn't need to know about such things."

"They didn't bother," Nymia said, her sweaty face set and hard, "because we're insignificant to them. You'd do well to remember it."

The slaves, guards, and masters were just ahead. The setting sun stretched their shadows in Bareris's direction like dark fingers reaching to gather him in.

Though why that ominous simile flickered through his mind, he couldn't imagine, because this was a joyous if not miraculous moment. He'd lost precious days to the virulent fever the child-thing's bite had induced. It had been only by the grace of Lady Luck that he'd spotted the tracks that told him the thralls and their captors had left the road. Yet he hadn't fallen so far behind he could never catch up, nor lost the trail either, and his search had come to an end. He kicked his weary horse into a gallop.

A small woman, her dark hair just beginning to grow out, scrambled forth from the ranks of the slaves. It was Tammith. Even at a distance, even after six years, he knew her instantly, as it was plain she'd recognized him despite his outlander's clothing and the sweaty unshaven locks flopping around his head. Crisscrossing her arms, she waved her hands over her head until an ore grabbed her and shoved her back in among the other thralls.

Seeing her subjected to rough treatment made Bareris all the more frantic to close the distance. Still, he forced himself to rein in his mare, because it had looked as if she was waving him off, and some of the guards were maneuvering to intercept him if he came any closer.

It was the final inexplicable oddity in a whole string of them. First he'd learned that necromancers had purchased Tammith and the other slaves in the middle of the night and marched them out of Tyraturos under cover of darkness. Then, bribing and questioning folk along the way, he'd gradually realized that over the course of the last several tendays, people—some recognizably Red Wizards, others possibly their agents—had marched a considerable number

of slaves into the sparsely populated north, where the demand for such chattels was ordinarily limited. After that came the discovery that Tammith's owners didn't appear to be taking her to a town, fief, or farm but rather into open country.

Bareris didn't need to know what it all meant. He only wanted

to extricate Tammith from the middle of it, but it came to him that, eager as he was to be reunited with the woman he loved, it might be prudent to approach the caravan with caution.

He reviewed the list of all the spells he knew, imagining how he might use them if things went awry, then sang a charm to augment his force of personality. While the enchantment endured, people would see him a shade taller and handsomer than he actually was. They'd find themselves more inclined to like, trust, and oblige him.

That accomplished, he walked his horse forward, sang, and accompanied himself on the yarting, like any wandering minstrel seeking a cordial welcome. On the surface, the song was simply the familiar ditty "The Eagle and the Mouse," but he wove magic through the lines. Enough, he hoped, to beguile the guards and keep them from loosing arrows at him before he drew close enough for conversation.

He paced the tune to conclude just as he reached the mass of people clustered in front of him. By then, charmed, perhaps, by his music, two Red Wizards had stepped forth to meet him. Both were young, which he supposed made sense: Their seniors were surely above the mundane chore of transporting slaves across country. It likewise gave him reason for hope. Older Red Wizards were wealthy almost without exception, but neophytes might still be striving to make their fortunes, hence that much more susceptible to bribery.

Bareris crooned words that would keep his steed from wandering or getting into mischief, swung himself down

from the saddle, and dropped to one knee in front of the Red Wizards. The show of respect was arguably excessive. By custom, a bow would have sufficed, but he wanted to flatter them.

"You can stand up," said the one on the right. He had jam stains on his robe and a bulge of paunch beneath it, though his spindly Mulan frame was still lean elsewhere. In time, that was

likely to change if he didn't master his love of sweets. "That was a fine song."

" 'That was a fine song,' " mimicked the other mage, his face tattooed in black and white to make it resemble a naked skull, and the fellow with the soiled robe winced at the sneer in his voice. "Who are you, sirrah?"

As a Mulan, Bareris was entitled to a more respectful mode of address, even from a Red Wizard, but he chose not to make an issue of it. "Bareris Anskuld, sir."

"Apparently," said the skull-faced wizard, "you've been following us."

"Yes, sir, all the way from Tyraturos."

The leaner mage sneered at his partner. "So much for your promise to cover our tracks. Have you ever done anything right?"

The jam lover flinched. "I reanimated the child just the way our master taught us, and Calmevik was supposed to be one of the best assassins in the city. Everybody said so."

Bareris's mouth turned dry as dust, and a chill oozed up his back. The trap in the alley hadn't been an essentially random misfortune after all. The Red Wizards were so determined on secrecy that they'd left minions behind to kill anyone inquiring into their business, and now he, idiot that he was, had delivered himself into their murderous clutches. Yet he still had his enchantment heightening his powers of persuasion and other tricks held in reserve. Perhaps, unlikely as it seemed, he could still steer this confrontation where he wanted it to go. It was either that or try to run, and with

Tammith's desperate, yearning eyes on him, the latter was a choice he simply couldn't make.

Feigning perplexity, he said, "Are you joking with me, Masters? I didn't meet this Calmevik or anyone who tried to hurt me. I'm just... do you see that pretty lass over there?" He pointed.

The skull-faced necromancer nodded. "The one who's been staring at you. Of course."

"Well, just as I followed you all the way north from Tyraturos, I tracked her all the way from Bezantur, where she sold herself into slavery just tendays ago as the result of a tragic misunderstanding. She thought her family needed the gold, but they didn't. She had no way of knowing I was already bound for home after years abroad, coming back to marry her with enough gold in my purse to support her and her kin forever after."

The black- and bone-colored face sneered. "How terribly sad, but it's no concern of ours."

"I understand that," Bareris said, "but I'm begging for your help." He couldn't break into actual song, or the Red Wizards would likely realize he was casting a spell, but he pitched and cadenced his voice in such a way as to imply melody in an effort to render himself still more charismatic and persuasive. "I've loved Tammith ever since we were children growing up in the gutters of Bezantur. It wasn't an easy life for a Mulan child whose family had fallen in poverty. Older boys bullied and beat me, and one day, even though she was of Rashemi descent herself, Tammith came to my aid. We both wound up with bruises and black eyes, on that day and others subsequent, but she never once regretted befriending me. That's the kind of loyal, courageous spirit she possesses. The spirit of someone who deserves a better life than slavery."

The wizard with the flabby belly looked caught up in the story, perhaps even touched by it. Bareris wasn't surprised. The mage had the air of someone who'd likewise been



bullied in his time, but if his partner was mellowing, it wasn't apparent from his demeanor.

Still, if a tale of love couldn't move him, maybe baser considerations would. "So I've come to buy her out of bondage," Bareris continued, "and I'll pay well, more than she can possibly

be worth to anyone but the man who loves her." He opened one of the hidden pockets in his sword belt, extracted three of the diamonds he and his former comrades had found cached in a dragon-worshiper stronghold, and proffered them in his palm for everyone to see. Even in the failing light, the stones gleamed, and impressed, warriors cursed or murmured to one another. "One jewel for each of you wizards, another for your retainers."

The pudgy mage swallowed as if greed had dried his throat. "Perhaps we could make some sort of arrangement," he said, then stiffened as if expecting his colleague to rebuke him.

But the other necromancer simply smirked and said, "Yes, why not? As the troubadour said, it's a great deal of coin, and what's a single slave one way or the other?" He stretched out his hand, and Bareris gave him the diamonds. "It's a bargain then. The wench is yours. Take her and ride away."

Tammith cried Bareris's name and ran toward him. He turned to catch her in his arms. It should have been a moment of supreme exultation, but he realized that all he felt was fear. Because it was too easy. Yes, he'd cast glammers that predisposed others to indulge him, sometimes even in defiance of their own best interests or common sense, and had offered treasure in addition, but the mage with the tattooed face had never appeared to fall under the influence of the spells, and the grim truth was he and his fellow necromancer were obviously supposed to keep their mission a secret, which would seem to preclude permitting Bareris and Tammith to depart to talk of what they'd seen.

Had Bareris been in the necromancer's position, and had he,

like so many Red Wizards, felt scant obligation to honor a pledge given to an inferior, he might well have pretended to accede to his petitioner's pleas just to put him off his guard. Then he'd attack as soon as a good opportunity presented itself.

Yet Bareris couldn't simply assume treachery and strike first. He didn't dare start an unnecessary fight when, outnumbered as

he was, he had so little hope of winning it. Weeping, Tammith flung herself into his embrace, kissed him, and babbled endearments. He hugged her but couldn't reply in kind. He was busy listening.

Yet even so, the necromancer with the tattooed face whispered so softly that for a moment, Bareris wasn't sure if he was actually hearing his voice or only imagining it. Then he felt a subtle prickling on his skin that warned of magic coming into being.

He whirled, dragging the startled Tammith around with him, and shouted. Bardic power amplified the cry into a thunderous boom capable of bruising flesh and cracking bone. The sound smashed the Red Wizard off his feet, and for an instant, Bareris dared to hope he'd killed him, but no, for he started to get up again.

Still, at least Bareris had disrupted the other man's spellcasting, and in so doing, he bought himself a moment he hoped to use to good effect. He beckoned to his horse. Ordinarily, the mare wouldn't have responded to such a gesture, but steed and rider still shared the empathic bond he'd sung into being just before he'd dismounted, and she came running.

He poised himself to leap onto the horse's back and haul Tammith up behind him, but having drawn himself to one knee, his black-and-white skull face now streaked with blood, the lean necromancer brandished a talisman. A bolt of crackling darkness leaped from the charm to spear the mare from behind. She shriveled as though starving past the

point of emaciation in a single heartbeat, and her legs gave way beneath her. She crashed to the ground, shuddered, and lay still.

The injured wizard lurched to his feet but evidently couldn't stand straight. Rather, he held himself doubled over as if his midsection was particularly painful. He looked about, no doubt taking in the fact that neither his fellow necromancer nor any

of their servants had yet moved to attack or otherwise hinder Bareris. Perhaps the enchantments the bard had cast still influenced them even now, or maybe hostilities had simply erupted too suddenly.

"Get him!" the Red Wizard screamed. "Get him, and we'll divide up all his jewels! But take him alive! A true bard will be useful!"

The guards readied their weapons and closed in from all sides. Bareris whipped out his sword and struggled to hold back panic and think. If they hoped to take him alive, that would hamper them a little. If he could somehow seize another horse—

Why then, he thought, the wizards would simply blast the animal out from under Tammith and him as they tried to ride away, or else the guards would shoot it full of arrows. Before the enemy readied themselves for battle, there had existed a slim chance of fleeing successfully on horseback, but it was gone now.

"Give me a knife," Tammith said. He could hear the fear in her voice, but only because he knew her so well. He handed her a blade and she positioned herself so they could protect one another's backs. "I'm sorry you came for me, sorry this is happening, but glad I got to kiss you one last time."

"It wasn't the last time."

In fact, he knew it very likely had been, but he wouldn't abandon hope even in his private thoughts, wouldn't defeat himself and save the enemy the trouble. Maybe he and Tammith could at least kill a few of the bastards before the

remainder overwhelmed them.

Blood ores shrieked their harrowing cry and charged. Bareris chanted, and power stung and shivered down his limbs. Tammith gasped as she experienced the same sensation.

The world, including the onrushing ores, slowed down, or at least that was how it appeared. In reality, Bareris knew, he and

Tammith were moving more quickly. The enchantment had given him a critical advantage in other combats, and he could only pray it would again.

A whip whirled at his calves. Had it connected, it would have wrapped around his legs and bound them together, but he leaped over the arc of the stroke and slashed the eyes of an ore armed with a cudgel. That put another guard behind him, in position to bash his head with the pommel of its scimitar. It was too sluggish, though, compared to his unnatural celerity. He pivoted, sliced its belly, turned, stepped, and hacked open the throat of the brute with the whip while it was still drawing the rawhide lash back for a second stroke.

That finished all the foes immediately in front of him, and it was then that he heard Tammith half cry, half gasp his name. It was possible she'd been screaming for a moment or two, and he'd been too intent on the blood ores to hear.

He turned. Another guard, a human on horseback, had looped a whip around Tammith's neck and was lifting her off her feet, essentially garroting her in the process. She flailed with her knife but couldn't connect. Neither her bravery nor the charm of speed sufficed to counter the warrior's advantages of superior strength and skill.

Bareris sprang in and cut at the guard's left wrist, and his blade bit to the bone. The horseman dropped the whip and Tammith with it. Blood spurting from his gashed extremity, features as bestial with rage and pain as the tusked, piggish face of any of the ores, he prompted his mount—a trained war-horse, evidently—to rear and try to batter Bareris with

its front hooves.

Bareris sidestepped and thrust his point into the animal's side. The destrier fell sideways, carrying its rider with it. They hit the ground hard and lay motionless thereafter.

Bareris cast about and found Tammith, a raw red welt now striping her neck, standing just behind him. "I'm sorry," she said.

He realized she meant she was sorry she hadn't managed to kill the rider with the whip, sorry Bareris had needed to save her. "It's all right." It occurred to him that the two dead horses sprawled on the ground constituted obstacles of sorts. If he and Tammith stood between them, it would make it difficult for very many of their foes to come at them at once. "Come on." He scrambled to the proper position, and she followed.

There he began another song. It would strengthen and steady them, and he could weave specific spells through the melody as needed. Pivoting, he peered to see who meant to attack him next.

A rider with a net spurred his mount into a canter. Crouching, blood ores circled as if they hoped to clamber over the top of one of the dead horses and take their adversaries by surprise.

Then the wizard with the tattooed face shouted, "Stop! You imbeciles are next to useless, but I can't afford to lose all of you. Forget about taking the minstrel alive, and don't go within reach of his sword, either. Shoot him and his whore, and So-Kehur and I will smite them with spells." He gave Bareris a vicious smile. "Unless, of course, you prefer to surrender."

"Don't," Tammith whispered. "I don't know what they'll do to us if we give up, but I'm sure it will be terrible."

Bareris suspected she was right, yet what was the alternative? To condemn her to die here and now? For while the two of them had evaded capture and injury thus far, it was obvious they no longer had any chance of getting away.

It was only the Red Wizard's order to take them alive that had provided even the illusion of hope, and that was no longer in effect.

"We have to surrender," he said, "and hope we can escape later on. Set the knife on the ground." He stooped to do the same with his sword, and then someone gave a startled yell. Bareris looked around to see slaves scrambling in all directions. Evidently they shared Tammith's conviction that some ghastly fate awaited them at the end of their trek, and they'd decided to take advantage of their keepers' distraction to make a break for freedom.

"Stop them!" the necromancer with the flabby midsection—evidently his name was So-Kehur—wailed.

Some of the guards obeyed. Horsemen galloped and wheeled to cut the thralls off. A blood ore dashed after a group of fleeing men and started slashing them down from behind, evidently on the assumption that if it killed enough of them, the slaughter would cow the rest into giving up.

Of course, not every warrior turned his back on Tammith and Bareris, but as best the bard could judge, even those who hadn't seemed momentarily flummoxed. So, for that matter, did the necromancers. Perhaps he had a hope left after all.

"Follow me!" he said to Tammith. He bellowed a battle cry and charged.

For an instant, he considered running at So-Kehur. Evidently worthless in a crisis, the round-bellied mage had yet to cast a spell and was surely an easier mark than the skull-faced warlock. He must possess an extraordinary aptitude for some aspect of sorcery, or else exceptionally good family connections, to account for his induction into an order of Red Wizards despite the lack of iron in his soul.

The problem was that even if they were of equivalent rank, it was plainly the necromancer with the tattooed face who'd taken charge of the caravan. Should they find themselves at odds, he was the one the warriors would obey, and just to make matters worse, he obviously held his fellow mage in

contempt. Bareris could easily imagine himself grabbing So-Kehur, using him as a shield, threatening him with his sword, and having the tattooed wizard laugh and order his underlings to go ahead and shoot them both.

No, if Bareris was going to take a hostage, it had to be the skull-faced mage himself, and so he ran straight at him. He prayed Tammith was still following close behind him but didn't dare waste the instant it would take to glance back and find out.

An arrow whistled past his head. An ore scrambled to block his path, and he split its skull. For a moment, his sword stuck in the wound, but then he managed to yank it free, flinging drops of blood through the air in the process.

Realizing his peril, the skull-faced necromancer brandished the talisman that had killed Bareris's horse, a round medallion, the bard now observed, fashioned of ebony and bone. He wrenched himself to the side, and the jagged blaze of shadow missed him by a finger length.

He raced onward. Just a few more strides would carry him within striking distance of his foe, and with enchantment quickening his actions, he had reason for hope that his adversary didn't have time to attempt any more magic.

But the necromancer had a trick in reserve. Even as his body backed away, his face seemed to spring forward like a striking snake. In reality, Bareris perceived, it was the tattooed skull mask that had torn free of his skin, and as it did, it rounded itself into a snarling head, and a gaunt, decaying body materialized beneath it. It had, in fact, become a ghoul, a slave creature or familiar the Red Wizard had carried inside his own body to evoke in a moment of ultimate need.

Startled by the vile-smelling thing's unexpected materialization, Bareris faltered. The ghoul leaped, its jagged, filthy nails ripping at his face. They nearly snagged him, but then trained reflex twisted him out of the way. He hacked at the bumpy ridge of spine in the corpse eater's

withered back, and the undead's legs buckled beneath it. Bareris sprinted on. Looking unexpectedly soft-featured and callow with his macabre mask stripped away, the Red Wizard lifted his talisman for another blast. Bareris had believed he was already running his fastest, but somehow he achieved an extra iota of speed to close the distance. He cut at the necromancer's hand, and the medallion and severed fingers tumbled through the air.

At that instant, Bareris hated the wizard, relished hurting him, and had to remind himself that he needed him alive. He shoved the necromancer down onto the grass, lifted his sword to threaten him—

A voice chanted rhyming words, and the ambient temperature fluctuated wildly. Bareris realized So-Kehur wasn't entirely useless after all. He'd finally found the presence of mind to cast a spell.

Something stabbed into the middle of Bareris's back. It didn't hurt, precisely, but weakness streamed outward from the site like ink diffusing through water. His sword suddenly felt too heavy to support. The blade dropped, and the hilt nearly pulled itself from his grasp. He collapsed to his knees. He told himself he didn't need his stolen strength. He could hold a hostage down with his weight, and menace him with the lethal sharpness of his blade. He floundered after the necromancer with the maimed hand, but now the mage was the quicker and stayed beyond his reach.

Until a mesh of sticky cable abruptly materialized on top of Bareris, binding and gluing him to the ground. "I did it!" So-Kehur crowed. "I took him alive, just like you wanted."

"So you did," the other wizard gasped, rising unsteadily, "and now I'm going to kill the wretch." Using his intact hand, he fumbled in one of his scarlet robe's many pockets, no doubt seeking the talisman required to facilitate some sort of death magic.

Enfeebled as he was, it was difficult for Bareris even to turn his head. Still, praying she could help him somehow, he



peered around for Tammith, only to see her slumped on the ground

clutching at a bloody wound in her leg. An ore stood over her, spear aimed to stab her again if she attempted further resistance. Elsewhere, the creature's fellow guards had all but completed the task of catching and subduing the rest of the slaves.

Bareris would have taken any risk to rescue or protect Tammith, but those things were no longer even remotely possible. He had to escape alone now in the hope of returning for her later, if, indeed, he could even manage that.

Rapidly as he dared—too much haste and he might botch the casting—he started singing. Weak as he was, he felt short of breath and had to struggle to achieve the precise intonation and cadence the magic required.

His would-be killer seemed clumsy with his offhand and was possibly on the verge of sinking into shock from the amputation of his fingers. He was slow producing his talisman, but when he realized Bareris was attempting magic, he managed to snatch it forth, flourish it, and jabber hissing, clacking syllables in some foul abyssal tongue.

A thing of tattered darkness, with a vague, twisted face and elongated fingers, swirled into existence between the necromancer and the prisoner caught beneath the sticky net. The wizard pointed, and the shadow pounced.

At the same instant, Bareris completed his spell-song. The world seemed to shatter into motes of light and remake itself an instant later.

The greatest spellcasters could work magic to whisk themselves and a band of comrades hundreds of miles in a heartbeat. Bareris had seen it done. He himself had no such abilities, or he would have employed them to carry Tammith to safety as soon as he clasped her in his arms, but he had mastered a song to translate a single person several yards in a random direction. A desperation ploy that could, with luck,

save a man's life after other measures failed.

Thus, he now sprawled on his belly a short distance away from his enemies and the slaves. As best he could judge, no one had spotted him yet, but somebody unquestionably would if he couldn't conceal himself within the next few moments. He tried to crawl, and with the curse of weakness still afflicting him, the effort was so difficult it made him sob. Crouching low, the shadow-thing started to pivot in his direction. Then something grabbed him by the sword belt and yanked him backward.

### Chapter six

26Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

N'tari Agneh rarely had much of an appetite, and this morning was no exception. She scraped the eggs, fried bread, and peach slices off her dish into the chamber pot then performed what had come to be a ritual.

First, she slid the edge of the knife that had arrived with breakfast across her forearm. The blade appeared sharp but failed to slice her skin. In fact, the length of steel deformed with the pressure, as if forged of a material soft as wax.

Next she gripped the spoon. It too was made of metal and had an edge of sorts. A trained warrior, striking in fury and desperation, should be able to hurt someone with it, but when she thrust it at her outstretched limb, she felt only a painless prod, and the utensil bent double.

That left the pewter plate. She slammed it against her arm, and it didn't even sting. It was like swiping herself with a sheet of parchment.

It was always thus. Every item that entered her prison immediately fell under the same enchantment, a charm that made it impossible for her to use it to hurt anyone, herself included. Strips of bed sheet and portions of the skimpy whorish costumes that were all she was given to wear unraveled as soon as she twisted them around her neck and pulled. Even the walls turned soft as eiderdown when she bashed her head against them.

She wondered how many more times she could perform her tests before accepting the obvious truth that her captor's precautions would never ever fail, before abandoning hope. What would happen to her then? Would she let go of the last shreds of her pride? Of sanity itself? The prospect was terrifying yet perversely tempting too, for if she broke or went mad, perhaps the torments would be easier to bear. Perhaps Aznar Thrul would even grow bored with her. Maybe he'd kill her or simply forget about her.

She struggled to quash the weak, craven urge to yield and be done with it, then noticed the vapor seething through the crack beneath the door.

Maris first thought was that some malevolent god had seen fit to grant the prayer implicit in her moment of despair, that Thrul, or one of his servants, was blowing a poisonous mist into the room to murder her. She didn't actually believe it. The zulkir hadn't shown any sign of growing tired of his toy, and she was certain that if he ever did decide to dispose of her, he'd at least want to watch her die. No, this was something else, which didn't make it any less alarming.

The vapor swirled together and congealed into a towering creature with purple-black hide, four arms, a vaguely lupine countenance, and a brand on its brow. Mari retreated and picked up a chair. Like every other article in her prison, the seat would fall to useless pieces if she tried to strike a blow with it, but perhaps the demon, if that was what the thing was, didn't know that.

Of course, it was ludicrous to imagine that such a horror might fear a nearly naked woman brandishing a chair in any case, but it was all she could think of to do.

The demon either smiled or snarled at her. The shape of its jaws was sufficiently unlike the structure of a human mouth that she couldn't tell which.

"Greetings, Tharchion," it rumbled. "My name is Tsagoth, and I've been hunting you for a while."

"I don't believe Aznar Thrul sent you," she said, struggling to

keep her voice steady. "If he wanted you to molest me, he'd also want to be here when you did it. If I were you, I'd think twice about bothering me without his consent."

Tsagoth snorted. "You're right. I am here without the zulkir's permission, so scream for help if you think anyone will come. Let's get that out of the way."

It—or rather, he, for the hulking creature was plainly male—was right. She could try calling for help, but she wouldn't.

"No. No matter how bad it gets, I never beg the swine for anything."

Tsagoth's hideous grin stretched wider. "I like that."

His attitude didn't actually seem threatening. Rather, it was . . . well, something else, something anomalous.

Still wary, but increasingly puzzled as well, she asked, "You like what?"

"Your toughness. I know something of what you've endured, and I expected to find you ruined, but you're not. That will make our task easier."

"What task?"

"Killing Thrul, of course. Attaining your revenge."

She shook her head. "You don't look like you need help to kill anybody you take a mind to kill."

"You flatter me, Tharchion. I'm more than a match for most ptey, but I'm not capable of destroying one of the most powerful

wizards of your world. Nor, perhaps, is anyone, so long as he's on his guard and armored with his talismans, enchanted robes, and whatnot. But what about those occasions when he lays aside his staff, divests himself of his garments, and is enflamed and heedless with passion? Don't you think he might be vulnerable then?"

"You mean, you want to hide here and attack while he's ... busy with me?"

"No, we can't do it that way, not when we don't know how many days or tendays it will be before he next visits you. I'm supposedly a slave here in the palace. If I go missing, people

will search for me, and even if they didn't, I imagine Thrul would sense a third party—a denizen of the Abyss, no less—lurking in your chamber. You'll have to be the one to kill him, and though I know little of humans, I suspect you'll prefer it that way."

"I would if it would work," Mari said, "but I don't see how it can. His magic prevents any object that enters the room from serving me as a weapon and limits me in other ways as well. If he gives me a direct order, I have no choice but to follow it." No matter how degrading. She felt nauseated at the memory of the laughter of the sycophants he'd brought to watch her perform.

"You won't need a weapon if you are the weapon," Tsagoth said, "and your puppet strings will break if you cease to be the sort of creature they were fashioned to control."

"You want to ... change me?"

"Yes." Evidently the mark on his forehead itched, for he scratched at it with the claws on his upper left hand. "I'm a blood fiend. An undead. As vampires prey on humans, so does my kind prey on demons, and like vampires, we can, when we see fit, share our gifts and essential nature with others."

"But you normally transform other creatures from the netherworld, don't you?"

"Yes," Tsagoth said, "and to be honest, I don't know if it will work the same on you. You mortals are fragile vessels to contain the power I hope to give you. I can only tell you that he who summoned me cast spells to increase the likelihood of our success."

"Who are you talking about?"

"I'm forbidden to say. Someone who wants to help you avenge yourself. Does anything else truly matter?"

Mari frowned. "It may. I'm willing to risk my life. As a warrior, I did it more times than I can remember, but if I change into something like you, will I still be the same person inside? Will I keep my soul?"

The blood fiend shrugged. The gesture looked peculiar with four arms performing it. "I can't say. I'm a hunter, not a scholar of such esoterica, but ask yourself if this spark you mortals prize so highly is truly of any use to you. Does it make your punishments and humiliations any less excruciating? If not, what good is it compared to a chance for retribution?"

Maybe he was right, and even if not, it abruptly came to her that in all probability, he was going to transform her whether she consented or not. Ultimately, he was as much a slave as she was and had no choice but to carry out his master's commands. He was offering her the opportunity to agree because . . . she wasn't sure why. It seemed preposterous to imagine that such a being could like her or consider her a kindred spirit, but perhaps her initial defiance had elicited a measure of respect.

If so, she was glad to have it. It had been a long while since anyone, even the servant who brought her meals, had shown her anything but contempt. She didn't want to forfeit that regard by showing fear, by obliging him to treat her as victim and pawn instead of accomplice, and perhaps that was what ultimately tipped the balance in her mind.

"Yes," she said. "Make me strong again."

Tsagoth grinned. "You were never truly strong, human, but you will be." He clawed a gash into the palm of his lower left hand and held it out to her. "Drink."

His blood was like fire in her mouth, but she forced herself to suck and lap it anyway.

Bareris wasn't sure if he was a guest or a prisoner of the gnolls, and at first he was nearly too sick to care. So-Kehur's curse of weakness was to blame. Ordinarily such afflictions passed quickly, but the effects of arcane magic, partaking as it did of primordial chaos, were never entirely predictable, and maybe some lingering vestige of the illness from which Bareris had only recently recovered rendered him particularly susceptible. In any event, it had taken him well

into the next day to start feeling any stronger at all.

Thus, when, guards shouting and cracking their whips, the caravan resumed its trek, he'd had no choice but to simply lie and watch, not that he could have prevented it in any case. Lie and watch as Tammith's captors marched her away into the gathering darkness.

Once the procession vanished, the gnoll who'd dragged him back into the low place in the earth, thus hiding him from the Red Wizards and their minions, rose, hoisted him onto its back, and headed north. A head taller than even a lanky Mulan, the creature with its hyenalike head, coarse mane, and rank-smelling spotted fur manifestly possessed remarkable strength and stamina, for its long stride ate up the miles without flagging, until it reached the rude camp—three lean-tos and a shallow pit for a fire—it had established with several others of its kind.

Evidently they were all out hunting and foraging, for as the night wore on, they returned one or two at a time with rabbit,

edible roots, and the like, which they grilled all together in an iron skillet. Bareris's rescuer—or was it captor?—insisted that he receive a share of the meal, and while some of its comrades snarled and bared their fangs, none was as big or powerful-looking, and their display of displeasure stopped short of actual resistance.

When the sun rose, they mostly lay down to sleep, though one stood watch. When Bareris's strength started to trickle back, he wondered if he could take the sentry by surprise, kill it or club it unconscious, and flee while the other gnolls slumbered on oblivious.

If so, it might be prudent to try. Gnolls had a savage reputation, and it was by no means ridiculous to conjecture that eventually the hyenafolk meant to fry some bard meat in their skillet.

Yet he was reluctant to strike out at anyone who, thus far at least, had done him more good than harm, and his lingering

weakness, coupled with his frustration over his failure to liberate Tammith, nurtured a bleak passivity. He simply lay and rested until sunset, when the sleeping gnolls began to rouse.

The big one walked over and peered down at him. "You better," he said. As his form was half man and half hyena, so was his speech half voice and half growl. If he hadn't possessed the trained ear of a bard, Bareris doubted he would have understood.

"I am better," he agreed, rising. "The curse is finally fading. My name is Bareris Anskuld."

The gnoll slapped his chest. "Wesk Backbreaker, me."

"Thank you for hiding me from my enemies."

"Hide easy. Sneak around humans and stinking blood ores all the time. They never see." Wesk laughed, and though it sounded different, sharper and more bestial than human laughter, Bareris heard the bitterness in it. "Or else they kill.

Not enough gnolls

to fight them. Not enough singer, either. Crazy to bother them like you did."

Bareris sighed. "Probably."

"But brave. And fight good. Like gnoll."

"That's high praise. I've seen your people fight." No need to mention that he'd witnessed it during his wanderings and had been fighting on the opposing side. "Was that the reason you rescued me?"

"Help you because you chop ringers of Red Wizard."

"Did he wrong you somehow?"

Wesk snorted. "Not just that one. All Red Wizards. Gnoll clan fight in legion. Wesk's father. Father's father. Always. Until Red Wizards say, no more war. Trade now. Then they make blood ores and say blood ores better than gnolls."

Bareris thought he understood: "To save coin, someone decided to reduce the size of the army, and you and your clan brothers were discharged."

"Yes. Just hunters now. Robbers when we can. Not fair!"



"On the ride north, I heard that Thay's at war with Rashemen again. The legions of Gauros and Surthay are looking for recruits."

"Recruits?" Wesk snarled. "Crawl back to take orders from blood ores? No!"

"I understand. It's a matter of pride." A mad thought came to him. "If you won't serve a tharchion, what about working for me?"

Wesk cocked his head. "You?"

"Why not? I can pay." In theory, anyway. In fact, most of his wealth was in his sword belt and purse, which the gnolls had already confiscated, but he'd worry about that detail when the time came.

"To kill Red Wizards? Want to, but no. Told you, gnolls too few."

"I understand we can't wage all-out war on them, but we can make fools of them, and maybe it will involve bleeding an ore or two along the way."

Wesk grunted. "Everyone needs to hear, but some not talk your talk. I..." He hesitated, evidently groping for the proper word.

"Translate? No need." Bareris sang softly, and the growling, yipping conversations of the other gnolls abruptly became intelligible to him. While the enchantment lasted, he would likewise be able to speak to them in their own language.

"Let's gather everyone up."

The impromptu assembly convened around the ashes of last night's cook fire, and Bareris found that the unwashed-dog smell of gnoll was markedly worse when several of the creatures gathered together. Some of the hyenafolk glared at him with overt scorn and hostility, some seemed merely curious, but with the possible exception of Wesk, none appeared cordial or sympathetic.

But a bard had the power to make good will flower where none had existed before, and as he introduced himself and spun his tale, he infused his voice with subtle magic to

accomplish that very purpose.

Yet even so, he wondered if a story of a loved one in peril could possibly move them. If gnolls were even capable of love, they'd never, so far as he knew, permitted a member of another race to glimpse any evidence of it. On the other hand, they were tribal by nature. That suggested something approximating a capacity for affection, didn't it?

In the end, perhaps the person he moved the most was himself. Spinning the story made everything he'd experienced acutely, painfully real, and when he told of seeing and touching Tammith only to lose her again immediately thereafter, it was all he could do to keep from weeping, but he couldn't allow the gnolls to think him a weakling.

He ended on a note of bitter anger akin to their own: "So you see how it's been for me. I undertook what should have been a simple task, especially considering that I was willing, nay, eager, to reward anyone able to help me, but I met contempt, betrayal, and bared blades every step of the way. Now I'm done with the mild and reasonable approach. I'm going to recover Tammith by force, and I want you lads to help me."

The gnolls stared at him for another moment, and then one, with a ruddy tinge to his fur and longer ears than the rest, laughed his piercing, crazy-sounding cackle. "Sorry, human. It can't be done."

"Why not?" Bareris demanded.

"Because the slaves go to Delhumide."

For a moment, Bareris didn't understand. They were all in Delhumide, and what of it? Then he realized the gnoll wasn't speaking of the tharch but of the abandoned city of the same name.

Twenty-three centuries before, when Thay had been a Mulhorandi colony, Delhumide had been one of its greatest cities and bastions of power, and when the Red Wizards rebelled, they'd deemed it necessary to destroy the place.

They'd evidently used the darkest sort of sorcery to accomplish their purpose, for by all accounts, the ground was still unclean today. Demons walked there, and a man could contract madness or leprosy just by venturing down the wrong street. No one visited Delhumide except the most reckless sort of treasure hunter, and few of those ever returned.

"Are you sure?" Bareris asked. It was, of course, a stupid question, born of surprise, and he didn't wait for an answer. "Why?"

"We don't know," said the gnoll. "We have better sense than to go into Delhumide ourselves."

"Even if we could," said Wesk. After listening to his broken Mulhorandi, Bareris found it odd to hear him speak fluently, but he naturally had no difficulty conversing in his own racial language. "Soldiers guard the place by day, and at night, f/v things come out. I don't know if they're the fiends that have always haunted the place or pets of the Red Wizards—maybe some of Both—and it doesn't matter anyway. They're there, and they're nasty."

"I understand," Bareris said, "but you fellows are experts at going unseen. You told me so yourself, and I witnessed your skill firsthand when you hid the both of us. I'll wager your legion used you as expert scouts and skirmishers."

"Sometimes," said Wesk.

"Well, I'm a fair hand at creeping and skulking myself, so long as I'm not crippled. With luck, we could sneak in and out of Delhumide without having to fight every warrior or lurking horror in the ruins."

"To steal back your mate," said the gnoll who'd jeered at him before.

"Yes. I've never seen Delhumide, but you've scouted it from the outside anyway. You can figure out the safest path in. Together, we can rescue Tammith, and in gratitude for your help, I'll make you rich enough to live in luxury in Eltabbar or Bezantur until the end of your days. Just give me back my

pouch and sword belt."

The gnolls exchanged looks, then one of them fetched the articles he'd requested from the shade beneath one of the lean-tos. As he'd expected, the gnoll removed his sword from its scabbard first, and when he looked inside the pigskin bag, the coins were gone.

But the gnolls hadn't discovered the secret pocket in the bottom of the purse. He lifted the bag to his mouth and exhaled into it. His breath activated a petty enchantment, and the hidden seam separated. He removed the sheets of parchment, unfolded them, and held them up for the gnolls to see. "Letters of credit from the merchant houses of Turmish and Impiltur. A little the worse for wear, but still valid."

Wesk snorted. "None of us can read, singer, nor has any idea how such papers are supposed to look. Maybe you guessed that and decided to try and fool us."

"No, but I can offer you a different form of wealth if that's what you prefer." He started opening the concealed pockets in the sword belt and was relieved to find that the gnolls hadn't found those either.

He brought out rubies, sapphires, and clear, smooth tapered king's tears. It was an absurd amount of wealth to purchase the services of half a dozen gnolls, yet for this moment anyway, he felt a sudden, unexpected spasm of loathing for the stones. If he'd never departed Bezantur to win them, he could have prevented Tammith from selling herself into slavery, and what good had they done him since? He had to resist a wild impulse to empty the belt entirely.

He spread the jewels on the ground with a flourish, like a juggler performing a trick. "Here. Take them if you're willing to help me."

The gnoll with the prominent ears laughed. "What's to stop us from taking them without helping you, then cutting up that pouch and belt and all your belongings to see if anything else is stashed inside? Wesk liked seeing you lop a Red Wizard's fingers off. It made him curious enough to haul

you back here and find out who you are, but we're not your friends, or friends to any human. We rob and eat hairless runts like you."

Bareris wondered if Wesk would take exception to his clan brother's assertion. He didn't, though, and perhaps it wasn't surprising. Bareris had claimed he was capable of leading the gnolls in a dangerous enterprise. If so, he should be competent to stand up for himself when a member of the band sought to intimidate him.

Or maybe the whim that had moved Wesk to rescue him originally had simply been a transient aberration, and now the

towering creature was all gnoll again, feral and murderous as the foulest of his kin.

Either way, it scarcely mattered. Bareris had known that displaying the jewels was likely to provoke a crisis, and now he had to cope as best he could. "Take the stones and give nothing in return?" he sneered. "Strange, that's just what the Red Wizards and blood ores tried to do, and I thought you deemed yourselves better than they are."

The gnoll with the long ears bared his fangs. "We are better. They couldn't kill you and take your treasure, but we can."

"No," said Bareris, "you can't. It doesn't matter that you withheld my sword or that you outnumber me. In reality, it almost certainly would, but he did his best to project utter self-confidence. "I'm a bard, a spellcaster, and my powers are what will enable us to make jackasses of the Red Wizards. I'll show you."

He picked up one of the king's tears and sang words of power. Tiny sparks flared and died within the crystal, and a sweet smell like incense suffused the air. Alarmed, some of the gnolls jumped up and snatched for their weapons or else lunged and grabbed for Bareris with their empty hands.

None of them acted in time, and light burned from within the jewel. It had no power to injure the gnolls. That would inevitably have resulted in a genuine battle, which was the

last thing he wanted, but the hyenafolk were essentially nocturnal by nature, and the sudden flare dazzled and balked them. Coupled with the charms of influence Bareris had already spun, it might, with luck, even impress them more than it actually deserved to.

At once, while they were still recoiling, the bard sprang to his feet and punched as hard as ever in his life. The uppercut caught the gnoll with the long ears under the jaw. His teeth clicked together, and he stumbled backward.

"That, "Bareris rapped, "was for impudence. Threaten me again and I'll tear you apart."

He then brandished the luminous king's tear as if it were a talisman of extraordinary power, and as he spoke on, he infused his words with additional magic—not a spell of coercion, precisely, but an enchantment to bolster the courage and confidence of all who heard it.

"It comes down to this," he said. "Even if you could kill me and steal the gems, it wouldn't matter. You'd still be a legion's castoffs, worthless in everyone's eyes including your own, but I'm offering you a chance to take revenge on the sort of folk who shamed you, and more than that, to regain your honor. Don't you see, if you join me in this venture, then you're not mere contemptible scavengers anymore. You're mercenaries, soldiers once again.

"Or perhaps you don't care about honor, "he continued. "Maybe you never had it in the first place. That's what people say about gnolls, that in their hearts and minds, they're vile as rats. You tell me if it's true."

Pupils shrunk small by the magical glare, Wesk glowered for a moment. Then he growled, "Put out the light and we'll talk some more."

Bareris's muscles went limp with relief, because while he still had little confidence that the gnolls would prove reliable if things became difficult, he discerned that, for the present at least, they meant to follow him.

## Chapter seven

29Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfhin

Aoth and Brightwing studied Dulos, the hamlet far below. For a moment, the place looked ordinary enough, the usual collection of sod-roofed huts and barns, but then the griffon rider observed that no one was working the fields and that sheep, pigs, and oxen lay torn and rotting in their pens. Then, his senses linked to his familiar's, he caught the carrion stink.

"The undead have been here," he said.

"No, really?" Brightwing replied.

Aoth was too intent on the work at hand, and perhaps too full of memories of the massacres at Thazar Keep and beside the river, to respond to the sarcasm in kind. "The question is, are they still here, or have they moved on?"

"I can't tell from up here."

"Neither can I. Perhaps the Burning Braziers can. Or the necromancers. Let's return to the company."

The griffon wheeled, and her wings, shining gold in the sunlight, swept up and down. Soon Aoth's patrol appeared below.

The force was considerably smaller than the army that had met disaster in the mouth of the Pass of Thazar. Supposedly, once the undead horde gained access to the central plateau, they'd dispersed into smaller bands. Thus, Nymia Focar's host had no choice but to do the same if they hoped to eradicate the creatures as rapidly as possible.

When Brightwing landed, Aoth's lieutenants were waiting to confer with him, or at least they were supposed to be his lieutenants. Nymia had declared him in charge, but Red Wizards had little inclination to recognize the authority of anyone not robed in scarlet, while the militant priests of Kossuth had somehow acquired the notion that Szass Tam and the other zulkirs had all but begged Iphegor Nath to dispatch them on this mission and accordingly believed everyone ought to defer to them.

Aoth tried to diminish the potential for dissension by making sure to solicit everyone's opinions before making a decision and by pretending to weigh them seriously even when they betrayed complete ignorance of the craft of war. It seemed to be working so far.

"The enemy," he said, swinging himself off Brightwing's back, "attacked the village."

Her red metal torch weapon dangling in her hand, the scent of smoke clinging to her, Chathi Oandem frowned. The hazel-eyed priestess of Kossuth had old burn scars stippling her left cheek, the result, perhaps, of some devotion gone awry, but Aoth found her rather comely nonetheless, partly because of her air of energy and quick intelligence.

"They've come this far west then, this close to Eltabbar."

"Yes," said Aoth. "It makes me wonder if they might even have been bold enough to attack Surag and Thazrumaros." They were larger towns that might have had some hope of fending off an

assault. "But for the time being, our concern is here. Can someone cast a divination to see if the settlement is still infested?"

Chathi opened her mouth, no doubt to say that she'd do it, but Urhur Hahpet jumped in ahead of her. Evidently not content with a single garment denoting his status, the sallow, pinch-faced necromancer wore a robe, cape, and shoulder-length overcape, all dyed and lined with various shades of red, as well as a clinking necklace of human vertebrae and finger bones.

"If it will help," he said, with the air of a lord granting a boon to a petitioner, "but we need to move up within sight of the place."

So they did, and Aoth made sure everyone advanced in formation, weapons at the ready, despite the fact that he and Brightwing had just surveyed the approach to the hamlet from the air and hadn't observed any potential threats. After seeing the lacedons rise from the river, he



didn't intend to leave anything to chance.

Nothing molested them, and when he was ready, Urhur whispered a sibilant incantation and spun his staff, a rod of femurs fused end to end, through a mystic pass. The air darkened around him as if a cloud had drifted in front of the sun, reminding Aoth unpleasantly of the nighthaunt's ability to smother light.

"There are undead," the wizard said. "A fair number of them."

"Then we'll have to root them out," said Aoth.

Urhur smiled a condescending smile. "I think you mean burn them out. Surely that's the safest, easiest course, and it will give our cleric friends a chance to play with their new toys."

The Burning Braziers bristled. Aoth, however, did his best to mask his own annoyance. "Safest and easiest, perhaps, but it's possible there are still people alive in there."

"Unlikely, and in any case, you're talking about peasants."

"Destroying the village would also make it impossible to gather additional intelligence about our foes."

"What do you think there is to learn?"

"We'll know when we find it." Aoth remembered his resolve to lead by consensus, or at least to give the appearance, and looked around at the other officers in the circle. "What do the rest of you think?"

As expected, the other necromancers sided with Urhur, but rather to Aoth's relief, the Burning Braziers stood with him, perhaps because Urhur so plainly considered himself their superior as well. It gave the griffon rider the leeway to choose as he wanted to choose without unduly provoking the Red Wizards, or at least he hoped it did.

"Much as I respect your opinions," he said to Urhur, "I think that this time we need to do it the hard way. We'll divide the company into squads who will search house to house. We need at least one necromancer or priest in every group, and we want the monks and Black Flame Zealots sticking close to the Burning Braziers in case a quell or something similar

appears. Clear?"

Apparently it was. Though after he turned away, he heard Urhur murmur to one of his fellows that it was a crime that a jumped-up little toad of a Rashemi should be permitted to risk Mulan lives merely to pursue a forlorn hope of rescuing others of his kind.

The nature of the battle to come required fighting on the ground, and as the company advanced, Aoth and Brightwing strode side by side.

"You should have punished Urhur Hahpet for his disrespect," the griffon said.

"And wound up chained in a dungeon for my temerity," Aoth replied, "if not now, then when the campaign is over."

"Not if you frightened him properly."

"His specialty is manipulating the forces of undeath. How easily do you think he scares?"

Still, maybe Brightwing was right. The Firelord knew, Aoth had never aspired to be a leader of men—he only needed good food, strong drink, women, magic, and flying to make him happy—and he still found it ironic that he'd ascended to a position of authority essentially by surviving a pair of military disasters. Contributing to a victory or two struck him as a far more legitimate qualification.

Which was to say, he was certain of his competence as a griffon rider and battle mage but less so of his ability as a captain. Still, here he was, with no option but to try his best.

"Maybe Urhur won't survive the battle," Brightwing said.

"Maybe that would be better all around." It was one of those moments when the griffon revealed that, for all her augmented intelligence and immersion in the human world, she remained a beast of prey at heart.

"No," Aoth said. "It would be too risky, and wasteful besides, to murder one of our most valuable allies when we still have a war to fight. Anyway, it wouldn't sit right with me."

The griffon gave her wings a shake, a gesture denoting impatience. Her plumage rattled. "This squeamishness is

why they never gave you a red robe."

"And here I thought I was just too short."

As the company neared the village, Aoth heard the flies buzzing over the carcasses in the corral, and the stink of spilled gore and decay grew thicker and fouler. The sound and smell clashed with the warmth and clear blue sky of a fine late-spring day, a day when lurking undead constituted a preposterous incongruity.

It occurred to him that if he could only expose them to the light of the sun shining brightly overhead, they might not lurk for long. He pointed his spear at the barn he and his squad were approaching, a structure sufficiently large that it seemed likely two or more families had owned it in common.

"Can you tear holes in the roof?"

Brightwing didn't ask why. She was intelligent enough to comprehend and might well have discerned the reason through their psychic link even if she weren't. "Yes." She unfurled her wings.

He stepped away to give her room to flap them. "Just be careful."

She screeched—derisively, he thought—and leaped into the air.

Aoth led his remaining companions to the door. He started through then hesitated. Should a captain take the lead going into danger or send common and presumably more expendable warriors in ahead? After a moment's hesitation, he proceeded. He'd rather be thought reckless than timid.

Inside, the mangled bodies of plow horses and goats lay where they'd dropped. The buzzing of the flies seemed louder and the stench more nauseating, as if the stale, hot, trapped air amplified them. Overhead, the roof cracked and crunched, and a first sunbeam stabbed down into the shadowy interior. Particles of dust floated in the light.

For a moment, nothing stirred except the swarming flies and the drifting motes. Then a thing that had once been a man floundered up from underneath a pile of hay. Clutching a

saw as if it hoped to use the tool as a makeshift sword, it shuffled forward.

The zombie wore homespun peasant garb and showed little sign of decay, but no one who observed the glassy eyes and slack features could have mistaken it for a living thing. It made a wordless croaking sound, and its fellows reared up from their places of concealment.

Aoth leveled his spear to thrust at any foe that came within reach and considered the spells he carried ready for the casting. Before he could select one, however, Chathi stepped to the front line. Not bothering with her torch, she simply glared at the zombies and rattled off an invocation to her god. Blue and yellow fire danced on her upper body, and Aoth stepped back from the sudden

heat. All but one of the zombies burst into flame and burned to ash in an instant. His face contorted with rage and loathing, a soldier armed with a battle-axe confronted the one remaining, first sidestepping the clumsy stroke of a cudgel and lopping off the gray hand that gripped it then smashing the undead creatures skull.

Was that it? Aoth wondered. Had they cleared the barn? Then Brightwing screeched, "Watch out! Above you!"

A hayloft hung over the earthen, straw-strewn floor, and now darkness poured over the edge of it like a waterfall. In that first instant, it looked like a single undifferentiated torrent of shadow. It was only when it splashed down and the entities comprising it sprang apart, launching themselves at one foe or another, that Aoth could make out the vague, inconstant semblances of men and hounds. Even then, the phantoms were difficult to see.

Brightwing's cry had no doubt served as a warning of sorts even to those who couldn't understand her voice. Still, the dark things were fast, and some of Aoth's men failed to orient on them quickly enough. The shadows snatched and bit, and though their touch shed no blood and left no visible marks, warriors gasped and staggered or collapsed entirely.

The soldier who'd destroyed the zombie bellowed and swept his axe through the spindly waist of the creature facing him. By rights, the stroke should have cut the spirit entirely in two, but manifestly unharmed, the phantom drove its insubstantial fingers into its opponent's face. He fell backward with the undead entity clinging like a leech on top of him.

"You need some form of magic to hurt them!" Aoth shouted. "If you don't have it, stay behind those who do!" He pivoted to tell Chathi to use her torch.

Unfortunately, she'd dropped it, probably when one of the ghostly hounds charged in and bit her. The same murky shape was lunging and snapping at her now. She might have destroyed or repelled it with a spell or by the simple exertion of faith that

had annihilated the zombies, but perhaps the debilitating effect of her invisible wound or simple agitation was hampering her concentration. Meanwhile, the monk assigned as her bodyguard was busy with two shadows, one man-shaped and one canine, of his own.

Aoth charged the point of his lance with additional power and drove it down at the shadow-beast assailing Chathi. The thrust drove into the center of the phantom's back and on through into the floor. The spirit withered away to nothing.

"Thank you," the priestess stammered, teeth chattering as if she'd taken a chill.

"Pick up the torch and use it," Aoth snapped then glimpsed motion from the corner of his eye. He pivoted toward it.

The shadow gripped the semblance of a battle-axe in its fists, and despite its vagueness, Aoth could make out hints of a legionnaire's trappings in its silhouetted form. The warrior who'd slain the zombie had risen as a shadow to menace his former comrades, and the transformation had occurred mere moments after his own demise.

Aoth tried to swing his spear into position to pierce his foe, but he'd driven it too deep into the earth. It took an instant

too long to jerk it free, and the phantom warrior rushed into the distance and swung its axe.

Had the axe been a weapon of steel and wood and not, in effect, simply the ghost of one, the blow would have sheared off his right arm at the shoulder. As it was, the limb went numb. Cold and weakness stabbed through his entire body, and his knees buckled. He stumbled, and the shade lifted the axe for another blow.

Before it could strike, a flare of flame engulfed it, and it burned away to nothing. As close as they'd been, the blast could easily have burned Aoth as well, but he wasn't inclined to complain.

"Thanks," he gasped to Chathi.

"Now we're even," she replied, grinning. Torch extended, she turned to seek another target.

Striving to control his breathing, Aoth invoked the magic bound in his tattoos to alleviate his weakness and the chill still searing his insides. He then rattled off a spell. Darts of blue light hurtled from his fingertips, diverging to streak at shadows at various points around the barn. Some saw the attack coming and sought to dodge, but the missiles veered to compensate. It was one of the virtues of this particular spell that in most situations it simply couldn't miss.

Next he conjured a crackling, forking flare of lightning. Like his previous effort and Chathi's attacks, it blasted more shades out of existence, but plenty remained, or so it seemed to him, reinforced by the tainted essences of those they'd already managed to slay, and he wondered if he and the Burning Brazier could eradicate them in time to keep them from annihilating the squad.

Then a crash sounded overhead. Scraps of wood and shingle showered down, and Brightwing plunged after them through the breach she'd created into the midst of several shadows. Her talons and snapping beak flashed right and left.

Her entry into the battle helped considerably. It only took a few more breaths to clear the remaining shades away.

The griffon tossed her head. "Stick me on the roof to punch holes. What a clever idea."

"It would have been useful," said Aoth, "if it had been a different sort of undead, vampires maybe, or certain types of wraith, hiding inside here." Something about his own words nagged at him, but he wasn't sure what and didn't have time to puzzle it out. He turned to Chathi. "Can you tend to those who are hurt?"

"You're first," she said.

She murmured a prayer, and a corona of blue flame rippled across her hand. She lifted her fingers to his face, and this time he, who'd experienced the healing touch of a cleric of the Firelord on previous occasions, had little difficulty resisting the natural urge to flinch away.

As he'd anticipated, the heat of the flames was mild enough to be pleasant as it flowed through him to melt chill and debility away. Her caress was pleasurable in a different way. Her fingers were hard with callus like his own, the digits of a woman who'd trained to fight the enemies of her faith with mundane weapons as well as magic, but there was softness in the way they stroked his cheek, and they lingered for a moment after the healing was done.

It gave him something else to think about, but not now, not when he didn't know what else was lying in wait in the hamlet or how the other squads were faring. He waited for her to minister to anyone else who'd suffered but survived the shadows' touch, then formed up his troops and moved on.

As it turned out, the undead had congregated in four sites altogether, whether for mutual defense or simply out of some instinct to flock, Aoth wasn't knowledgeable enough to guess. It wasn't easy to clean out any of the three remaining locations, but none proved as difficult as the barn. The Thayans purged the village with acceptable losses on their own side, or so Nymia Focar would certainly have said.

As he glumly surveyed the several dead men laid out on the

ground, Aoth found he had difficulty achieving a similar perspective. Over the years, he'd grown accustomed to watching fellow legionnaires die, but never before had it been because he himself had ordered them into peril.

Necklace rattling, bony staff sweating a greenish film, perhaps the residual effect of some spell he'd cast with it in the heat of battle, Urhur Hahpet sauntered up to view the corpses.

"Well," he said, "it appears there were no survivors for you to rescue."

"No," Aoth said.

"I assume, then, that you gleaned some critical piece of information to justify our casualties."

Aoth hesitated, fishing inside himself for the insight that had nearly come to him after Chathi burned the zombies. It continued to elude him. "I don't know. Probably not."

Urhur sneered. "By the Dark Sun! If you claim to be a wizard, act like it. Stop moping. You blundered, but you're lucky. You have necromancers to shield you from the consequences of your poor judgment. Just stand back and let me work."

Aoth did as the Red Wizard wished. Urhur cast handfuls of black powder over the bodies then whirled his staff through complex figures. He chanted in a grating language that even his fellow mage couldn't comprehend, though the mere sound of it made his stomach queasy. The ground rumbled.

Aoth felt a sudden urge to stop the ritual, but of course he didn't act on it. Szass Tam himself had decreed that his minions were to exploit the fallen in this manner. Besides, Aoth had served with zombies and such since his stint in the legions began. Indeed, thanks to the Red Wizards who'd brought them along, he already included a fair number in the company he currently commanded, so above and beyond any normal person's instinctive distaste for necromancy and its products, he didn't understand his own reaction.

The dead rose, not with the lethargic awkwardness of



common zombies, but with the same agility they'd exhibited in life. The amber eyes of dread warriors gleaming from their sockets, they came to attention and saluted Urhur.

"You see?" the Red Wizard asked. "Here they stand to serve once more, only now stronger, more difficult to destroy, and incapable of cowardice or disobedience. Improved in every way."

Responsive to Xingax's will, the hill-giant zombie fumbled with the array of lenses on their swiveling steel arms. The hulking creature was trying to give its shortsighted master with his mismatched eyes a clear, close view of the work in progress on the floor below the balcony, but it couldn't align the glasses properly no matter how it tried. Finally Xingax waved it back, shifted forward on his seat, and pulled at the rods with the small, rotting fingers at the ends of his twisted, stubby arms.

There, that was better. The activity below flowed into focus just as the two scarlet-robed wizards completed their intricate contrapuntal incantation.

Clinking, the heap of bones in the center of the pentacle stirred and shifted. It was, of course, no feat to animate the intact skeleton of a single man or beast. A spellcaster didn't even need to be a true necromancer to master the technique. But if the ritual worked, the bones below, the jumbled remains of several creatures, would become something new and considerably more interesting.

Despite the presumed protection of the pentacle boundary separating them from Xingax's creation, each of the Red Wizards took a cautious step backward. The bone pile lifted a portion of itself—a temporary limb, if one chose to see it that way—and groped toward the mage on the left. Then, however, it collapsed with a rattle, and Xingax felt the power inside it dissipate. The wizard it had sought to menace cursed.

Xingax didn't share his assistant's vexation. The entity's failure to thrive simply meant he hadn't solved the puzzle

yet, but he would. It just took patience.

Perhaps the problem lay in the third and fourth stanzas of the incantation. He'd had a feeling they weren't entirely right. He twisted around to his writing desk with its litter of parchments,

took up his quill, and dipped it in the inkwell. Meanwhile, below him, zombies shuffled and stooped, picking up bones and carrying them away, while the Red Wizards began the task of purifying the chamber. Everything had to be fresh, unsullied by the lingering taint of the ritual just concluded, if the next one was to have any hope of success.

Xingax lost himself in his ponderings, until the wooden stairs ascending to his perch creaked and groaned, and the undead giant grunted for his attention.

Now Xingax felt a pang of irritation. Unsuccessful trials didn't bother him, but interruptions did. Glowering, he heaved himself around toward the top of the steps.

A pair of wizards climbed into view. They knew enough to ward themselves against the aura of malign energy emanating from Xingax's body and had surely done so, but potbellied So-Kehur with his food-spotted robe appeared queasy and ill at ease even so.

The mage's nervousness stirred Xingax's contempt. He knew what he looked like to human eyes: an oversized, freakishly deformed stillborn or aborted fetus. Pure ugliness, and never mind that, if his mother had carried him to term, he would have been a demigod, but a necromancer should be inured to phenomena that filled ordinary folk with horror.

At least Muthoth didn't show any overt signs of revulsion, which was not to suggest that he looked well. Bandages shrouded his right hand, and bloodstains dappled his robe; even dry, they had an enticing, unmistakable coppery smell. The ghoul familiar he'd worn like a mask of ink was gone.

Muthoth regarded Xingax with a blend of arrogance and wariness. The undead entity supposed it was understandable. Muthoth and So-Kehur were Red Wizards,

schooled to hold themselves above everyone except their superiors in the hierarchy, yet they were also young, little more than apprentices, and

Xingax manifestly occupied a position of authority in the current endeavor. Thus, they weren't sure if they needed to defer to him or could get away with ordering him around.

One day, Xingax supposed, he'd likely have to settle the question of who was subordinate to whom, but for now, he just wanted to deal with the interruption quickly and return to his computations.

"What happened to the two of you?" he asked.

"We had some trouble on the trail," Muthoth said. "A man attacked us."

Xingax cocked his head. "A man? As in, one?"

Muthoth colored. "He was a bard, with magic of his own."

"And here I thought it was an article of faith with you Red Wizards that your arts are superior to all others," Xingax drawled. "At any rate, I assume you made him pay for his audacity."

Muthoth hesitated. "No. He translated himself elsewhere."

"By Velsharoon's staff! You couriers have one simple task, to acquire and transport slaves without attracting undue attention— never mind. Just tell me exactly what happened."

Muthoth did, while So-Kehur stood and fidgeted. Impatient as Xingax was to return to his experiments, he had to admit it was a tale worth hearing if only because it seemed so peculiar. He was incapable of love in both the spiritual and anatomical senses, but in the course of dealing with beings less rational than himself, he'd acquired some abstract understanding of what those conditions entailed. Still, it was ultimately unfathomable that a man could so crave the society of one particular woman that he'd risk near-certain destruction on her behalf.

Of course, from a practical perspective, the enigmas of human psychology were beside the point, and Xingax

supposed he ought to focus on what was pertinent. "You didn't tell this Bareris Anskuld you were heading into Delhumide, did you?" he asked.

"Of course not!" Muthoth snapped.

"It's conceivable," said Xingax, "that he's inferred it, but even if he has, I don't see what he can do about it. Follow? If so, our sentinels will kill him. Tell others what he's discovered? We'd prefer that he not, and we'll try to find and silence him, but really, he doesn't know enough to pose a problem. He may not dare to confide in anyone anyway. After all, the will of a Red Wizard is law, and by running afoul of the two of you, he automatically made himself a felon."

Muthoth nodded. "That's the way I see it."

"We're just sorry," said So-Kehur, "that the bard killed some of our warriors, and the ores had to kill a few of the slaves."

Muthoth shot his partner a glare, and Xingax understood why. While telling their story, Muthoth had opted to omit that particular detail.

"Did you reanimate the dead?" Xingax asked.

"Yes," Muthoth said.

"Then I suppose that in all likelihood, it didn't do any extraordinary harm." Xingax started to turn back to his papers then realized the wizards were still regarding him expectantly. "Was there more?"

"We assumed," said Muthoth, "that you'd want to divide up the shipment, or would you rather I do it?"

Xingax screwed up his asymmetrical features, pondering. He didn't want to forsake his creative work for a mundane chore. He could feel the answer to the puzzle teasing him, promising to reveal itself if he pushed just a little longer. On the other hand, the slaves were a precious resource, one he'd occasionally come near to exhausting despite the best efforts of the couriers to keep him supplied, and he wasn't certain he could trust anyone but himself to determine how to exploit them to best effect.

"I'll do it," he sighed.

He beckoned to the giant zombie, and the creature picked him up to ride on its shoulders as if he were a toddler, and the mindless brute with its low forehead and gnarled apish arms, his father. His frayed, greasy length of umbilicus dangled over the zombie's chest.

In reality, it wasn't necessary that anyone or anything carry Xingax. If he chose, he could move about quite adequately on his own, but it suited him that folk should think him as physically helpless as his ravaged fetal form appeared. For the time being, he and his associates were all on the same side, but an existence spent primarily in the Abyss had taught him just how quickly such situations could alter, and a time might come when he'd want to give one of his compatriots a lethal surprise.

His balcony was one of a number of such vantage points overlooking the warren of catacombs below. Despite the extensive labor required, he'd ordered the construction of a system of catwalks to connect one perch to the next and only descended to mingle with his living associates when necessary. Even necromancers couldn't maintain their mystical defenses against his proximity every moment of every day, nor could they work efficiently if vomiting, suffering blinding headaches, or collapsing in convulsions.

As his undead giant lumbered along with Muthoth and So-Kehur trailing at its heels, it pleased Xingax to see the complex bustling with activity, each of his minions busy at his—or its—job. That was as it must be, if he was to make progress in his investigations and earn his ultimate reward.

One of the Red Wizards had conjured a perpetual gloom to shroud the platform overlooking the enormous vault where the couriers caged newly arrived slaves. The prisoners' eyes couldn't penetrate the shadows, but an observer experienced no difficulty looking out of them. Thus, Xingax could study the thralls without agitating them.

He didn't scrutinize any one individual for long. He trusted his first impressions, his myopia notwithstanding. "Food," he

said, pointing. "Basic. Basic. Advanced. Food. Basic." Then he noticed the wizards simply standing and listening. "Why aren't you writing this down?"

"No need," said Muthoth. "So-Kehur will remember."

"He'd better," Xingax said. He continued assigning the slaves to their respective categories until only two remained. They were young women who'd found a corner in which to settle. Likely aghast at what she'd glimpsed on the walk to her current place of confinement, the one with long hair appeared to have withdrawn deep inside herself. Her companion was coaxing her to sample the porridge their captors had provided.

"Food and food," Xingax concluded, feeling a renewed eagerness to return to the problem of the defective ritual. "Is there anything else?"

Maddeningly, it appeared there was. "My hand," said Muthoth, lifting the bandaged one. "I've heard about your skill with grafts, and I was hoping you could do something to repair it."

"Why, of course," Xingax said. "I have a thousand vital tasks to occupy me, but I'll gladly defer them to help a mage so incompetent that he couldn't defend himself against a lone madman even with a second wizard and bodyguards to help. Because that's exactly the sort of ally I want owing me a favor."

Muthoth glared, looking so furious that Xingax wondered if he was in danger of losing control. So-Kehur evidently thought so. He took a step backward, lest a sorcerous attack strike him by accident.

Xingax called on the poisonous power inside him. He stared into Muthoth's eyes and released an iota of it, hoping to suggest its full devastating potential in the same way that a mere flick of a whip reminds a slave of the shearing, smashing force of which the lash is capable.

Muthoth flinched and averted his eyes. "All right! If you're too busy, I understand."

"Good," Xingax rapped. He started to direct his servant to carry him away then noticed that the confrontation had delayed him long enough for another little drama to start playing itself out in the hall below.

Specifically, one of the blood ores had entered the makeshift barracoon. The warrior was somewhat reckless to enter alone. It must assume the slaves were too cowed to try to hurt it, and to all appearances, it was right. They shrank from it as it prowled about.

The ore's gaze fell on the two women sitting on the floor in the corner. It leered at them, started unfastening its leather breeches, and waved for the slave with the short hair to move away from her companion.

The ore's actions were neither unusual nor illicit. The wizards and guards had permission to amuse themselves with the slaves provided they didn't damage them to any significant degree. Still, despite the lure of his work, Xingax lingered to watch for another moment. Though he would never have admitted it to another, he sometimes found the alien matter of sexuality intriguing as well as repugnant.

To his astonishment, the short-haired slave stood up and positioned herself between the ore and her friend. "Find someone else," she said.

The ore grabbed her, perhaps with the intention of flinging her out of its way. She hit it in the face with the bowl of gruel. The earthenware vessel shattered, and the warrior stumbled backward. The slave lunged after it, trying to land a second attack, but the guard recovered its balance and knocked her staggering with a backhand blow to the face. Her momentary incapacity gave it time to draw its scimitar. It stalked after the thrall, and she retreated. "Help me!" she called. "If we all try, we can kill at least one of them before the end! That's better than nothing!"

Apparently the other slaves were too demoralized to agree, because none of them moved to help her. Knowing then that she stood alone, pale with fright but resolute, the short-

haired woman shifted her grip on the shard of bowl remaining in her hand to make it easier to slash with the broken edge.

"She has courage," Xingax said.

"That's the one the bard wanted to buy," So-Kehur said.

"Really? Well, perhaps his obsession does make at least a tiny bit of sense. In any case, I was wrong about her." Xingax waved his hand, dissolving the unnatural gloom so the ore could see him. "Leave her alone!"

Surprised, the warrior looked up to find out who was shouting at it. It hesitated for a moment, seemingly torn between the prudence of unquestioning obedience and the urgency of anger, then howled, "But she hit me!"

"And she'll suffer for it, never fear." Xingax turned to So-Kehur. "The woman comes to me."

After Aoth's company destroyed the creatures occupying Dulos, he opted to stop there for the night. His weary warriors could use the rest.

So could he, for that matter, but he proved incapable of sitting or lying still. Eventually he abandoned the effort, left the house he'd commandeered, and started prowling along the perimeter of the settlement.

It was a pointless thing to do. Shortly before dusk, he and Brightwing had flown over the immediate area and found it clear of potential threats. On top of that, he already had sentries posted.

Yet he couldn't shake a nagging unease. Maybe it was simply because the undead were more powerful in the dark. If any remained in the region and aspired to avenge their fellows, this was the time when they would strike.

Abruptly a shape appeared in the pool of shadow beneath an elm, and though Aoth could barely see it, its tilted, knock-kneed stance revealed it to be undead. No living man would choose to assume such an awkward position, but a zombie, incapable of discomfort, its range of motion altered by its death wounds, very well might.



Aoth leveled his spear and drew breath to raise the alarm, then noticed the gleam of yellow eyes in the creature's head. The thing was a dread warrior, one of his own command. As it still possessed sufficient intelligence to fight as it had in life, so too could it stand watch, and apparently Urhur Hahpet or one of his fellow Red Wizards had stationed it here to do so. Maybe the whoreson believed Aoth's security arrangements were inadequate, or perhaps it was simply that the necromancer, too, felt ill at ease.

"Don't blast it," said a feminine voice. "It's one of ours."

Startled, heart banging in his chest, Aoth jerked around to see Chathi Oandem smiling at him from several paces away. He tried to compose himself and smile back.

"I wasn't going to," he said. "I recognized it just in time to avoid making a fool of myself."

The priestess strolled nearer. Though she still carried her torch weapon, she wasn't wearing her mail and helmet anymore, just flame-patterned vestments that molded themselves to her willowy form at those moments when the cool breeze gusted.

"I thought all wizards had owl eyes and could see in the dark."

Aoth shrugged. "I know the spell, but I haven't been preparing it lately. I'd rather concentrate on combat magic, especially

considering that I can look through Brightwing's eyes when I need to."

"Except that the poor tired creature is asleep at the moment."

If Chathi had observed that, it meant she'd passed by his quarters. He felt a rush of excitement at the thought that perhaps she'd gone there intentionally, looking for him, and kept on seeking him after.

"Good. She's earned her rest."

"So have you and I, yet here we are, up wandering the night. Is something troubling you?"

He wondered if a captain ought to confide any sort of anxiety or misgivings to someone at least theoretically under his command, then decided he didn't care. "There shouldn't be, should there? We won our battle and received word this afternoon that other companies are winning theirs. Everything's quiet, yet..." He snorted. "Maybe I'm just timid." "Then we both are. I've trained since I was a little girl to fight the enemies of Kossuth, and I've destroyed my share, but these things! Is it the mere fact they're undead or that we have no idea why they came down from the mountains that makes them so troubling we can't relax and celebrate even after a victory?"

"A bit of both, I suppose." And something more as well, though he still wasn't sure what.

She smiled and touched his cheek as she had to heal him. Even without a corona of flame, her hardened fingertips felt feverishly warm. "I wonder—if you and I tried very hard, do you think we could manage a celebration despite our trepidations?"

He wanted her as urgently as he could recall ever wanting a woman, but he also wondered if he'd be crossing a line he shouldn't, for all that Nymia did it constantly. She was a tharchion and he but a newly minted captain.

"If this is about my having saved your life," he said, playing for time until he was sure of his own mind, "remember you saved

mine, too. You said it yourself, we're even."

"It's not about gratitude but about discovering a fire inside me, and when a priestess of Kossuth finds such a flame, she doesn't seek to douse it." Chathi grinned. "That would be blasphemy. She stokes it and lets it burn what it will, so shall we walk back to your quarters?"

He swallowed. "I imagine one of these huts right in front of us is empty."

"Good thinking. No wonder you're the leader."

When she unpinned her vestments and dropped them to

pool around her feet, he saw that her god had scarred portions of her body as well as her face, but those marks didn't repel him either. In fact, he kissed them with a special fervor.

Each gripping one of her arms, the two blood ores marched Tammith toward the doorway, and she offered no resistance. Perhaps she'd used up her capacity for defiance seeking to protect Yuldra, or maybe it was simply that she realized the two gray-skinned warriors with their swinish tusks were on their guard. She had little hope of breaking away and wouldn't know which way to run if she did.

The spacious vault beyond the door proved to be a necromancer's conjuring chamber lit, like the rest of the catacombs, by everburning torches burning with cold greenish flame. Though Tammith had never seen such a place before, the complex designs chalked on the floor, the shelves of bottled liquids and jars of powders, the racks of staves and wands, and the scent of bitter incense overlying the stink of decay were familiar to her from stories.

Two Red Wizards currently occupied the room, along with half a dozen zombies. A couple of the latter shuffled forward and reached out to collect Tammith.

The gods had been cruel to make her believe that she might still have Bareris and freedom only to snatch them away. Her spirit had nearly shattered then, and she still didn't understand why it hadn't. Perhaps it was the knowledge that her love had escaped. He could still have a life even if she couldn't.

In any case, she hadn't yet succumbed to utter crippling terror and had vowed to meet her end, whatever it proved to be, with as much bravery as she could muster. Still, the prospect of the enduring the touch of the zombies' cold, slimy fingers, of inhaling the fetor of their rotten bodies close up, filled her with revulsion.

"Please!" she said. "You don't need those creatures to hold me. I know I can't get away."

The Red Wizards ignored her plea, and the zombies, with their slack mouths and empty eyes, trudged a step closer, but then a voice spoke from overhead.

"That sounds all right. Just position a couple of the zombies to block the exit, in case she's not as sensible as she seems." Tammith looked up and observed the loft above the chamber for the first time. The giant zombie was there and its master, too. A number of round lenses attached to a branching metal framework hung before the fetus-thing like apples on a tree. From her vantage point, the effect was to break his body into distorted sections and make it even more hideous, if such a thing was possible.

Since the creature had decreed that she was to come to him, she'd expected to encounter him wherever she ended up. Still, the actual sight of him dried her mouth and made her shudder. How could anything so resemble a baby yet look so ghastly and radiate such a palpable feeling of malevolence? She struggled again to cling to what remained of her courage.

She didn't hear either of the Red Wizards give a verbal command or notice a hand signal either, but the zombies stopped

advancing as the fetus-thing had indicated they should. The ones looked to one of the necromancers, and he waved a hairless, tattooed hand in dismissal. The guards wasted no time departing, as if even they found the chamber a disturbing place.

Tammith forced herself to gaze up at the baby-thing without flinching. "Thank you for that anyway. I'm tired of being manhandled."

"And corpse-handled is even worse, I imagine." The creature smirked at its own feeble play on words. "Think nothing of it. This could be the beginning of a long and fruitful association, and we might as well start off in a friendly sort of way. My name is Xingax. What's yours?"

She told him. " 'A long and fruitful association?' Then ... you

don't mean to kill me?"

"Actually, I do, but death needn't be the end of an entity's existence. Lucky for me! Otherwise I wouldn't have fared very well after my mother's cuckold husband tore me from the womb."

"I... I won't be one of those." She gestured to indicate the zombies. "I'll make your servants tear me to pieces first."

Xingax chuckled. "Do you imagine I'd have no use for the fragments? If so, you're mistaken, but please, calm yourself. I don't intend to turn you into a zombie. You have a much more interesting opportunity in store.

"You've seen enough," continued the fetus-thing, "to discern what this place is: an undead manufactory. Given sufficient resources, we'd create only powerful, sentient specimens, since those are the most useful for our purposes. Alas, the reality is that it takes considerably more magic to evoke a ghost or something similar than it does to make a mindless automaton like my giant or my helpers' helpers.

"So we function as we best we can, given our limitations. Many of the slaves who come here end up as zombies or at best

ghouls. Others go to feed newly created undead in need of such sustenance, and afterward we animate their skeletons. Only a relative few have the chance to attain a more advanced state of being."

Tammith shook her head. "I can tell you think that's a boon. Why would you offer it to me when I've raised my hand to your servants more than once?"

"For that very reason. You have a boldness we can put to good use. Assuming the transformation takes. That's the other thing I should explain. I recreate types of undead that became extinct long ago and breed others altogether new. It's a part of my mandate, and more than that, my passion. My art. The closest I'll ever come to fatherhood. The problem is that we have to refine the magic by trial and error, and well, obviously, it isn't right until it's right."

She imagined what might befall a captive when the magic was still wrong. She pictured herself shrieking in endless anguish, her body mangled like an apprentice potter's first botched attempt at shaping a vessel on the wheel. Hard on that image came the realization that she'd been a fool to cringe from the prospect of becoming a zombie. It was the best fate that could befall her. Her body would remain a thrall but her soul would fly free to await Bareris in the afterlife.

She lunged at the nearer of the Red Wizards. He had a dagger with a curved blade sheathed on his belt. She'd snatch it, slash the artery in the side of her neck, and all fear and misery would spurt away with her blood.

The necromancer had obviously been waiting for her to attempt some sort of violence. He barked a word she didn't understand, swept his left hand through a mystic figure, and black motes swirled around it to form a spiral.

The flecks of darkness didn't hurt her, but they fascinated her. She had no choice but to pause and stare at them, even though

a part of her, now disconnected from her will, screamed that she mustn't.

The wizard stepped back and the zombies shambled forward, closing in on her. Their clammy hands grabbed her and held tight. The spiral faded, allowing her to struggle, but writhe as she might, she couldn't break free, and when she stamped on her captors' feet, snapped her head backward to bash a zombie's jaw, and even sank her teeth into spongy, putrid flesh, it didn't matter. Since the creatures didn't feel pain, the punishment couldn't make them fumble their grips.

"I rather expected that," said Xingax, "but it's still a shame. You were doing so well."

"Shall I subdue her?" asked the mage with the dagger.

"I suppose it would be best," Xingax replied.

The Red Wizard extracted a pewter vial from a hidden

pocket in his robe, and holding it at arm's length, he uncorked it. He then moved to stick it under Tammith's nose. She strained to twist her face away, but with the zombies immobilizing her, it was futile.

The fumes had a nasty metallic tang she tasted as well as smelled. Her limbs went slack, and wouldn't so much as twitch no matter how she struggled. She might as well have been asleep.

"Put her in the pentacle," Xingax said.

The zombies laid her on her back, spread her arms wide, and crossed her legs at the ankle. Then, for a considerable time, the Red Wizards chanted rhymes in an unknown tongue while brandishing smoking censers; slender, gleaming swords; and a black chalice carved from a single piece of jet. At first it was sinister but ultimately incomprehensible. Eventually, however, the necromancer with the dagger—she had the impression he was the senior of the pair—crouched down beside her and dipped his forefinger in the black cup. It came out

red. He rubbed her lips with it, then her gums, then worked it past her teeth to dab at her tongue. She tasted the salty, coppery tang of blood.

After that, she could somehow perceive the power gathering in the air and conceived the crazy, terrifying notion that the chanted incantations were a thing unto themselves, a living malignancy that was simply employing the mages to further the purposes implicit in the tercets and quatrains. She still couldn't comprehend them, but she felt the meaning was on the very brink of revealing itself to her and that when it did, she wouldn't be able to bear it.

A mass of shadow seethed into existence above her, thickening until she could barely see the ceiling or Xingax peering avidly down at her through a pair of lenses positioned one before the other. The clot of darkness took on a suggestion of texture, of bulges, hollows, and edges, as if it had become a solid object. Then it shattered.

Into an explosion of enormous bats. The rustling of their countless wings echoing from the stone walls, they flew in all directions. Xingax cried out in excitement. The Red Wizards, for all that they'd conjured the flock and were presumably in control of it, retreated to stand with their backs against a wall.

A bat lit on a zombie's shoulder and plunged its fangs into its throat. The animated corpse showed no reaction to the bite, but despite its passivity, the bat fluttered its wings and took flight again only a heartbeat later.

Three bats settled on a second zombie, bit it, and abandoned it immediately thereafter. Because they crave the blood of a living person, Tammith thought, her heart hammering. Because they want me.

She made a supreme effort to roll over onto her belly. If she could only move a little, she could crawl away from the middle of the floor, then . . . why, then nothing, she supposed. The part

of her that was still rational realized it wasn't likely to matter, but she needed to try. It was better than simply accepting her fate, no matter how inescapable it was.

Her limbs trembled. The effect of the vapor was wearing off. She felt a thrill of excitement, of lunatic hope, and then the first bat found her. Cold as the zombies' fingers, its claws dug into her chest for purchase as its fangs sought her throat.

As it sucked the wounds it had inflicted, the rest of the flock descended on her, covering her like a shifting, frigid blanket, the bats that couldn't reach her shoving at the ones who had like piglets jostling for their mother's teats. Scores of icy needles pierced her flesh.

Had she ever imagined such a fate, she might have assumed that so much cold would numb her. Somehow, it didn't. The assault was agony.

The bats tore at her lips, nose, cheeks, and forehead. Not my eyes, she silently begged, not my eyes, but they ripped



those too, and then she finally passed out.

Tammith woke to pain, weakness, searing thirst, and utter darkness. At first she couldn't remember what had happened to her, but then the memory leaped at her like a cat pouncing on a mouse.

When it did, she decided Xingax couldn't possibly have intended to create the crippled, sightless creature she'd become. The experiment had failed as he'd warned it might.

"So kill me!" she croaked. "I'm no use to you!"

No one answered. She wondered if she actually was alone or if Xingax and the Red Wizards were still present, silently studying her, preparing to put her out of her misery, or—gods forbid!—readying a new torment.

Suddenly she was frantic to know, which made her blindness intolerable. She felt a flowing, a budding, in the raw orbits of her skull, and then smears of light and shadow wavered into existence before her. Over the course of several moments, the world sharpened into focus. She realized she'd healed her ruined eyes, or if the bats had destroyed them entirely, grown new ones.

It suggested that Xingax's experiment hadn't been a complete failure after all, but she appeared to be alone nonetheless. Her captors had deposited her in a different chamber, a bare little room with a matchboarded door. Up near the ceiling, someone had cut a hole, probably connecting to the ubiquitous system of catwalks, but if the aborted monstrosity was up there peeping at her, she couldn't see it.

Which, she recalled, didn't necessarily mean he wasn't. He'd concealed himself easily enough when taking stock of the new supply of slaves. She wheezed his name but received no reply.

She supposed that if she did constitute some sort of glorious success, and he wasn't here to witness it, the joke was on him. But in fact, she doubted it. The Red Wizards had managed to stuff a little magic into her, enough to preserve

her existence and restore her vision, but accomplishing the latter had left her even weaker and more parched than before. She stared at the myriad puncture wounds on her hands and forearms, willing them to close, and nothing happened.

At that point, misery overwhelmed her. She curled up into a ball and wept, though her new eyes seemed incapable of shedding actual tears, until a key grated in the lock of the door. It creaked open, and an ore shoved Yuldra through and slammed it after her. The lock clacked once again.

Tammith extended a trembling hand. She knew the other captive couldn't do anything substantive to ease her distress, but Yuldra could at least talk to her, clasp her fingers, or cradle her, perhaps. Any crumb of comfort, of simple human contact

with someone who wasn't a pitiless torturer, would be better than nothing.

Yuldra flinched from the sight of her ravaged body, let out a sob of her own, wheeled, and scrambled into a corner. There she crouched down and held her face averted, attempting to shut out the world as she had before.

"How many times did I take care of you?" Tammith cried. "And now you turn your back on me?"

Nor was Yuldra the only person who'd so betrayed her. She'd spent her life looking after other people. Her father the drunkard and gambler. Her brother the imbecile. And what had anyone ever done for her in return? Even Bareris, who claimed to love her with all his heart, had abandoned her to chase his dreams of gold and excitement in foreign lands.

She realized she was on her feet. She was still thirsty, it was a fire burning in her throat, but she'd shaken off weakness for the moment, anyway. Anger lent her strength.

"Look at me," she snapped.

Her voice was sharp as the crack of a whip, and like a whip, it tangled something inside of Yuldra and tugged at her. The slave started to turn around but then shook off the coercion.

"Fine," Tammith said, stalking forward, "we'll do it the hard way."

She didn't know precisely what it was. Everything was happening too quickly, with impulse and fury sweeping her along, but when her upper canines stung and lengthened into fangs, their points pressing into her lower lip, she understood.

The realization brought a horror that somewhat dampened her rage if not her thirst. I can't do this, she thought. I can't be this. Yuldra is my friend.

She stood and fought against her need. It seemed to her that she was winning. Then her body burst apart into a cloud of bats much like the conjured entities that had attacked her, and that

made the world a different place. The sense of sight she'd so missed became secondary to her ability to hear and comprehend the import of her own echoing cries, but the fragmentation of her consciousness was an even more fundamental change. She retained her ultimate sense of self and managed her dozens of bodies as easily as she had one, yet something was lost in the diffusion: conscience, perhaps, or the capacities for empathy and self-denial. She was purely a predator now, and her bats hurtled at Yuldra like a flight of arrows.

Rather to Tammith's surprise, given Yuldra's usual habit of cringing helplessness, the other slave fought back. She flailed at the bats, sought to grab them, and when successful, squeezed them hard enough to crush an ordinary animal, wrung them like washcloths, or pounded them against the wall. The punishment stung, but only for an instant, and without doing any real harm.

Meanwhile, Tammith clung to the other thrall and jabbed her various sets of fangs into her veins and arteries. When the hot blood gushed into her mouths, she felt a pleasure intense as the fulfillment of passion, and as it assuaged her thirst, the relief was a keener ecstasy still.

Before long, Yuldra weakened and then stopped struggling altogether. Once Tammith drank the last of her, the bats took flight. They swirled around one another, dissolved, and instantly reformed into a single body, now cleansed of all the wounds that had disfigured it before.

That didn't make the remorse that came with the restoration of her original form any easier to bear. The guilt fell on her like a hammer stroke, and she felt a howl of anguish welling up inside.

"Excellent," Xingax said.

She looked up. The fetus-thing had been watching through the hole high in the wall, just as she'd suspected, and had now dissolved the charm that had hidden him from view.

"I believe that with practice," he continued, "you'll find you can remain divided for extended periods of time. I'm confident you'll discover other uncommon abilities as well, talents that set you above the common sort of vampire."

"Why didn't you answer me when I called to you before? Why didn't you warn me?"

"I wanted to see how far instinct would carry you. It's quite a promising sign that you managed to manifest a number of your abilities and take down your first prey without any mentoring at all."

"I'm going to kill you," she told him, and with the resolve came the abrupt instinctive realization that she didn't even need to shapeshift to do it. His elevated position afforded no protection. She dashed to the wall and scrambled upward like a fly. It was as easy as negotiating a horizontal surface.

Partway up, dizziness and nausea assailed her. Her feet and hands lost their ability to adhere to the wall, and she plunged back to the floor. She landed awkwardly, with a jolt that might well have broken the old Tammith's bones, though the new version wasn't even stunned.

As the sick feeling began to pass, Xingax said, "You didn't really think we'd give you so much power without insuring that you'd use it as we intend, did you? I'm afraid, my

daughter, that you're still a thrall, or at best, a vassal. If it's any comfort to you, so am I, and so are the Red Wizards you've encountered here, but so long as we behave ourselves, our service is congenial, and we can hope for splendid rewards in the decades to come."

## Chapter eight

30Mirtul, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Delhumide gleamed like a broken skeleton in the moonlight. The siege engines and battle sorceries of the ancient rebels had shattered battlements and toppled towers, and time had chipped and scraped at all that had survived the initial onslaught. Yet the Mulhorandi had built their provincial capital to last, and much remained essentially intact. Bareris found it easy to imagine the proud, teeming city of yore, which only served to make the present desolation all the more forbidding.

He wondered if it was simply his imagination, or if he truly could sense a miasma of sickness and menace infusing the place. Either way, the gnolls plainly felt something too. They growled and muttered. One clasped a copper medallion stamped with the image of an axe and prayed for the favor of his god.

Having cajoled them this far, Bareris didn't want to give them a final chance to lose their nerve. As before, enchantment lent him the ability to speak to them in their own snarling, yipping

language, and he used it to say, "Let's move. "He skulked forward, and they followed.

He prayed they weren't already too late, that something horrible hadn't already befallen Tammith. It was maddening to reflect on just how much time had passed since he'd watched the Red Wizards and their cohorts march her away. It had taken him and the hyenafolk a while to reach Delhumide. Then, for all that the gnolls had scouted the general area before, Wesk Backbreaker insisted on observing the perimeter of the city before venturing inside. He maintained it would increase their chances of success, and much as Bareris chafed at the delay, he had to admit the gnoll chieftain was probably right.

As they'd gleaned all they could, so too had they begun to plan. After some deliberation, they decided to sneak into

Delhumide by night. True, it was when the demons and such came out, but even if the horrors were in fact charged with guarding the borders of the ruined city, it didn't appear they did as diligent a job as the warriors keeping watch by day. Bareris hoped he and the gnolls had a reasonable chance of slipping past them unmolested, especially considering that though creatures like devils and the hyenafolk themselves could see in the dark, they couldn't see as far as a man could by daylight.

He and his companions picked their way through the collapsed and decaying houses outside the city wall then over the field of rubble that was all that remained of the barrier at that point. The bard wondered what particular mode of attack had shattered it. The chunks of granite had a blackened, pitted look, but that was as much as he could tell.

The gnolls slinking silently as mist for all their size, the intruders reached the end of the litter of smashed stones fairly quickly. Now they'd truly entered Delhumide, venturing deeper than any of their scouts had dared to go before. A cool breeze moaned down the empty street, and one of the hyenafolk jumped as if a ghost had ruffled his fur and crooned in its ear.

Wesk waved, signaling for everyone to follow him to the left. Their observations had revealed that shadowy figures flitted through the streets on the right in the dark. Occasionally, one of the things shrieked out peals of laughter that inspired a sudden self-loathing and the urge to self-mutilate in all who heard it. Bareris had no idea what the entities were, but he was certain they'd do well to avoid them.

The intruders turned again to avoid a trio of spires that, groaning and shedding scraps of masonry, sometimes flexed like the fingers of a palsied hand. The facades of crumbling houses seemed to watch them go by, the black empty windows following like eyes. For a moment, a sort of faint clamor like the final fading echo of a hundred screams

sounded somewhere to the north.

The noise made Bareris shiver, but he told himself it had nothing to do with him or his comrades. Delhumide was replete with perils and eerie phenomena; they'd known that coming in. It wasn't a problem if you could keep away from them, and so far their reconnaissance had enabled them to do so.

That luck held for another twenty heartbeats. Then one of the gnolls deviated from their course by just a long, loping stride or two, just far enough to stick his head into a courtyard with a rusty wrought-iron gate hanging askew and a cracked, dry fountain in the center. Something had evidently snagged the warrior's attention, some hint of danger, perhaps, that demanded closer scrutiny.

The gnoll suddenly snarled and staggered, tearing at himself with his thick canine nails. At first Bareris couldn't make out what was wrong, but when he saw the swelling black dots scurrying through the creature's spotted fur, he understood. The gnolls had fleas, a fact he'd discovered when he started scratching as well, and the parasites on the outlaw in the courtyard

were growing to prodigious size. Big as mice, they swarmed over him, burying their proboscises and heads in his flesh to drain his blood. Bulges shifted under the gnoll's brigandine as insects crawled and feasted there as well.

A second gnoll rushed to help his fellow, but as soon as he entered the courtyard, he suffered the same affliction. The two hyenafolk flailed and rolled and shrieked together. Their fellows hovered outside the gate, too frightened or canny to risk the same consequence.

Bareris sang. Magic warmed the air, and he felt a sort of tickling as his own assortment of normal-sized fleas jumped off him. He then charged into the courtyard, and the enchantment radiating outward from his skin drove the giant parasites off the bodies of their hosts just as easily. With a rustling, seething sound, they scuttled and bounded



into the shadows at the rear of the space.

He still had no desire to linger inside the crooked gate. For all he knew, the influence haunting the courtyard had other tricks to play. Fast as he could, he dragged the dazed, bloody gnolls back out onto the street, where the spirit, or whatever it was, couldn't hurt them any further. At least he hoped it couldn't, because they needed a healer's attention immediately if they were to escape infirmity or worse, and in the absence of a priest, he'd have to do.

He chanted charms of mending and vitality. The other gnolls looked on curiously until Wesk started grabbing them and wrenching them around. "Keep watch!" the chieftain snarled. "Something else could have heard the ruckus or hear the singer singing."

Gradually, one gnoll's wounds stopped bleeding and scabbed over, a partial healing that was as much as Bareris could manage for the time being. The other, however, appeared beyond help. He shuddered, a rattle issued from his throat, then he slumped

motionless. Meanwhile, the survivor sat up and, hand trembling, groped for the leather water bottle strapped to his belt.

"How are you?" Bareris asked him.

The gnoll snorted as if the question were an insult.

"Then when you're ready, we'll press on."

"Are you crazy?"

Bareris turned and saw that the speaker was Thovarr Keentooth, the long-eared gnoll he'd punched during their first palaver.

"You said you knew how to get us in and out without the spooks bothering us," the creature snarled, spit flying from his jaws. He apparently meant to continue in the same vein for a while, but Wesk interrupted by backhanding him across the muzzle and tumbling him to the ground.

"We said, "the chieftain growled, "we'd do our best to avoid the threats we knew about, but there might be some we

hadn't spotted. This was one such, and you can't blame the human or anyone else for missing it, seeing as how it was invisible till someone stepped in the snare."

"I'm not talking about 'blame,'" Thovarr replied, picking himself up. "I'm talking about what's sensible and what isn't. There's a reason no one comes here, and—"

"Blood ores do," Bareris said. "Are they braver than you ? "

Thovarr bared his fangs like an angry hound. "The pig-faces have Red Wizards to guide them. We only have you, and you talk big but don't keep us out of trouble."

"Enough!" snapped Wesk. "We're soldiers again, and soldiers expect to risk their lives earning their pay. If you don't have the belly for it, turn back now, but know it means the rest of us cast you out for a coward."

That left Thovarr with three options: obey, leave his little pack forever, or fight Wesk then and there for his chieftaincy. Apparently the first choice was the most palatable, the perils of

Delhumide notwithstanding, because the long-eared gnoll bent his head in submission. Til stick," he growled.

They dragged the dead warrior's corpse into a shadowy recessed doorway, where, they hoped, it was less likely anyone or anything would notice it. There they abandoned it without ceremony. Bareris had dealt just as callously with the mortal remains of other fallen comrades when a battle, pursuit, or flight required immediate action, and he had no idea whether gnolls even practiced any sort of funerary observances. It wouldn't have astonished him to learn that they ate their dead as readily as they devoured any other sort of meat or carrion that came their way. Still, he found it gave him a pang of remorse to leave the creature unburied and unburned, without even a hymn or prayer to speed its soul on its way.

Maybe it bothered him because Thovarr was essentially correct. If Bareris hadn't used magic to undermine the gnolls' bettet judgment, they would never have ventured

into Delhumide. His friends from more squeamish—or as they might have put it, more ethical—lands might well have deemed it an abuse of his gifts.

But his present comrades were hyenafolk, who boasted themselves that their kind lived only for war and slaughter, and Bareris was paying them a duke's ransom to put themselves in harm's way. If he'd sinned, then the Lord of Song could take him to task for it when his spirit knelt before the deity's silver throne. For now, he'd sacrifice the gnolls and a thousand more like them to rescue Tammith.

Wesk lifted a hand to halt the procession. On the other side of an arched gateway rose a cylindrical tower. Constructed of dark stone, vague in the darkness, it reminded Bareris of some titan's drum.

He peeked around the edge of the gate and squinted at the flat roof, but he couldn't spot anything on top of it. He'd considered singing a charm to sharpen his eyes before entering the city

but had opted not to. He could only cast so many spells before exhausting his powers. Better, then, to trust the night vision of his companions and conserve his magic for other purposes.

"Is it up there?" he whispered, referring to the blood-orc sentry that usually kept watch on the roof.

Wesk bobbed his head up above the low wall ringing the tower to check. "Yes."

"Can you really hit it from down here?" ftziens asked.

He knew Wesk was a skillful archer, maybe even as adept as he claimed. He'd watched the gnoll shoot game on the trek to Delhumide, and only once had the creature missed. Still, Bareris was enough of a bowman in his own right to know just how difficult a shot it was. The ore was four stories up and partly shielded by a ring of merlons.

Wesk grinned. "I can hit it. I'm not some feeble runt of a human."

He caressed the curves of his yew bow and growled a spell of

his own, evidently some charm known to master archers and hunters. The longbow glinted as though catching Selune's light in a way it hadn't before, despite the fact that nothing had changed in the sky. Wesk nocked an arrow, stepped into the center of the gate, drew the Retchings to his ear, and let the missile fly.

To Bareris's eyes, the shaft simply vanished into the dark, but from Wesk's grunt of satisfaction, and the fact that he didn't bother reaching for a second arrow, it was evident the first one had found its mark. Bareris imagined the ore collapsing, killed before it even had an inkling it was in peril. He and the gnolls skulked across the open ground between the wall and the tower. They had no reason to think anyone else was looking—it seemed likely the rest of the folk inside were happy to shut themselves away from the terrors infesting the night—but they couldn't be sure.

Stone steps rose to a four-paneled door. As Bareris climbed toward it, he hoped to find only a handful of warriors waiting on the other side. Whoever was garrisoning this particular outpost, though, he and the hyenafolk had no choice but to deal with them.

That was because one could only see so far into a ruined city while scouting it from the outside, and thus the intruders had little idea what lay beyond this point. If they were to avoid lurking demons and locate Tammith, someone would have to enlighten them.

Bareris tried the door and found that, as expected, it was locked or barred. He motioned for the gnolls to stay behind him then bellowed.

The magic infusing his voice cracked the door and jolted it on its hinges but failed to break it open. He threw himself against it and bounced back with a bruised shoulder, but then Wesk and Thovarr charged past him and hit the barrier together. They smashed it out of its frame to slam down on the floor of the hall beyond. Ores, three kneeling in a circle around their dice and piles of coppers, and two more

wrapped in their blankets, goggled at them in amazement. As it turned out, there were no mages on hand, and with the ores caught unprepared, the fight that followed was less a battle than a massacre. In fact, that was the problem. Caught up in the frenzy of the moment, the gnolls appeared to have forgotten that the point of their incursion was to take at least one of the enemy alive.

Bareris cast about. For a moment, he could see only gory, motionless, gray-skinned bodies and the hyenafolk still hacking at them. Then he spotted an ore that was down on its back but still moving, albeit in a dazed manner, groping for the dirk in its boot. Thovarr swung his axe over his head to finish the creature off.

"No!" Bareris shouted. He lunged and shoved Thovarr away from the ore, swiped the latter's hand with the flat of his sword to stop its reaching for the knife, and aimed his point at its throat. "We have to talk to one of them, and this appears to be the only one left."

He proceeded with the interrogation as soon as the gnolls verified that the rest of the tower was empty. "You can answer my questions and live," he told the ore in its own language, "or I can give you to my friends to kill in whatever fashion amuses them. It's up to you."

"I can't tell you anything!" the ore pleaded. "I'll die!"

"Nonsense. Perhaps your masters will punish you for talking if they get their hands on you, but you can run away."

"That's not it," said the ore. "The Red Wizards put a spell on me, on all of us. If we talk about their business, we die."

From the manner in which he attended to the conversation, it was apparent Wesk understood the orcish tongue, and now he and Bareris exchanged puzzled glances. The bard wondered again what endeavor merited such extraordinary attempts at secrecy.

"Listen to me," Bareris said, infusing his voice with the magic of persuasion, "you don't know that your masters truly laid a spell on you. It would have been a lot less work

simply to lie and claim they did. Even if the enchantment is real, you can't be sure it took you in its grip. It's the nature of such charms that they can always fail to affect a particular target. On the other hand, you know my sword is real. You see it with your own eyes, and you can be absolutely certain of dying if I cut your throat with it. Bearing all that in mind, whom do you choose to obey, the wizards or me?"

The ore took a deep breath. Til answer."

"Good. Where in the city do the slaves end up?"

The prisoner sucked in another breath. Bareris realized the ore was panting with fear. "They—"

A single word was all it took. The ore's back arched, and surprised, Bareris failed to yank his sword back in time to avoid piercing the ore's neck. But the point didn't go in deep, and he doubted the ore even noticed the wound. The ore was suffering far more grievous hurts.

The ore's back continued to bend like a bow, and his extremities flailed up and down, pounding the floor. His eyes rolled up in their sockets, and bloody froth foamed from his mouth. Hoping the creature might survive if he could only keep him from swallowing his tongue, Bareris cast about for an implement he could wedge in his mouth, but before he could find one, the ore thrashed a final time and lay still. A foul smell suffused the air. The warrior had soiled himself in his death throes.

"Well," said Wesk, "it wasn't lying about the geas."

Wo,"Bareris answered.

He felt a twinge of shame for compelling the ore to such a death, and scowling, he tried to quash the feeling. He'd had no choice but to force the creature to speak.

"So what do all of us 'soldiers' do how? "Thovarr asked. "Just wander around and look for the slave? Delhumide's big, and it's got a spook hiding in every shadow."

Bareris prayed it hadn't come to that. "We search this place," he said. "Maybe we'll find something useful."

They began by searching the ores' bodies then moved on to ransacking their possessions. Wesk dumped out the contents of a haversack, picked up a parchment, unfolded it, and then brought it to Bareris.

"Is this anything?" asked the gnoll.

Bareris studied the scrawled diagram. It didn't have any words written on it, just lines, circles, rectangles, and dots, and for a moment, he couldn't decipher it. Then he noticed certain correspondences, or at least he hoped he did. He rotated the paper a quarter turn, and the proper orientation made the similitude unmistakable.

"It's a map of this part of the city."

Wesk eyed it dubiously. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's difficult to tell because it's crudely drawn and the ore left so much off, but this is the breach in the wall we came through, here are the laughing shadows, and here the towers that squirm of their own accord. The mapmaker used the black dots to indicate areas best avoided. This is the building we're in now, and this box near the top must be the place where the Red Wizards themselves have taken up residence. Why else would anyone take the trouble to indicate the best path from here to there?"

The gnoll chieftain leered like a wolf spying a lost lamb.

"Nice of the pig-faces to go to so much trouble just to help us out."

With the map to guide them, they skulked nearly to the center of Delhumide without running afoul of any more malevolent spirits or mortal foes, but as Bareris peered expectantly, waiting for the structure indicated on the sketch to come into view, he felt a sudden difference and froze. The gnolls sensed something as well, and growling, they peered around.

It took Bareris a breath or two to puzzle out precisely what they'd all registered. Probably because it was the last thing he would have expected. "It's . . . more pleasant here. The feeling of evil has lifted."

"W%y.>"askedWesk.

Bareris shook his head. "I don't know. Just enjoy the relief while you can. I doubt it will last."

It did, though, and when they finally beheld their goal, he knew why. It was a square-built, flat-roofed hall notable for high columns covered in carvings and towering statues of a manlike figure with the crowned head of a hawk. Thayans no longer worshiped Horus-Re, but bards picked up a miscellany of lore in the course of acquiring new songs and stories, and Bareris had no difficulty identifying the Mulhorandi god. The structure was a temple, built on hallowed ground and still exerting a benign influence on the immediate area centuries after.

Bareris shook his head. "I don't understand. I'm sure it's the right place, hut why would the Red Wizards set up shop in a shrine like that?"

"The god's power keeps the bogeys away," suggested Wesk. "The bogeys the warlocks didn't whistle up themselves, I mean."

"Maybe, but wouldn't the influence also make it more difficult to practice necromancy? It's inherently—"

"What's the difference?"Thovarr snapped.

Bareris blinked, then smiled. "Goodpoint. We don't care what they're doing, how, or why. We just want to rescue Tammith and disappear into the night. We'll keep our minds on that."

Employing buildings, shadows, and piles of rubble for cover, they crept partway around the temple to look for sentries. It didn't take Wesk long to spot a pair of gaunt figures with gleaming yellow eyes crouched atop the roof.

"Undead," he said. "I can hit them, but zombies and the like are hard to kill. I don't know if I can put them down before they sound the alarm."

"Give me one of the arrows you mean to shoot," Bareris said. The gnoll handed it over, and Bareris crooned to it, the charm a steady diminuendo from the first note to the last. At its end, the whisper of the wind, the skritch-skritch-skritch of



one of the gnolls scratching his mane, and indeed, the entire world fell silent.

Bareris handed the arrow back and waved his arm, signaling for Wesk to shoot when he was ready. The gnoll chieftain laid it on the string, jumped up from behind the remains of a broken wall, and sent it streaking upward. Sound popped back into the world as soon as the shaft carried its invisible bubble of quietude away.

Wesk's followers shot their own arrows, and at least half found their mark, but as the gnoll had warned, the undead proved difficult to slay. Shafts jutting from their bodies like porcupine quills, they picked up bells from the rooftop and flailed them up and down. Fortunately, though, the sphere of silence now enshrouded them. The bells refused to clang, and after another moment, the amber-eyed creatures collapsed, first one and then the other.

Wesk balled up his fist and gave Bareris a stinging punch to the shoulder. "For a human," said the gnoll, "you have your uses."

"I like to think so," Bareris replied. "Let's go."

Keeping low, they ran toward the temple. Their path carried them near a weathered statue of Horus-Re. In its youth, the figure had brandished an ankh to the heavens, but its upraised arm had broken off in the millennia since and now lay in fragments at its feet.

The temple proved to consist primarily of long, open, high-ceilinged galleries, with a relative scarcity of interior walls to separate one section from the next and no doors to seal any of the entrances and exits. To Bareris's war-trained sensibilities, that made it a poor choice for a stronghold, but perhaps in Delhumide, the site's aura of sanctity seemed a more important defense than any barrier of wood or stone.

In any case, he was far more concerned about something else. The temple was occupied. From time to time, they slipped past chambers where folk lay sleeping. But there were fewer than Bareris had expected, nor did he observe

any indication that Red Wizards were practicing their arts here on a regular basis.

Eventually Wesk whispered the obvious, "If all those slaves were ever here, they aren't anymore."

"They must ^." Bareris said, not because he truly disagreed, but because he couldn't bear to endorse the gnolls conclusion.

"Do you want to wake somebody and ask him?"

The bard shook his head. "Not unless he's a mage. Any soldier would likely just go into convulsions like our ore. It's not worth the

risk of rousing the lot of them, at least not until we've searched the entire place."

They prowled onward, looking for something, anything, to suggest an answer to the riddle of the missing thralls' whereabouts. In time they found their way to a large and shadowy chamber at the center of the temple. Once, judging from the raised altar, the colossal statue of Horus-Re enthroned behind it, and faded paintings depicting his birth and deeds adorning the walls, the chamber had been the hawk god's sanctum sanctorum. More recently, someone had erected a freestanding basket arch in the middle of the floor, its pale smooth curves a contrast to the brown, crumbling stonework on every side. When Bareris spotted it, he caught his breath in surprise.

"What?" whispered Wesk, twisting his head this way and that, looking for danger.

"The arch is a portal," Bareris said, "a magical doorway linking this place to some other far away. I saw one during my travels and recognize the rune carved on the keystone."

"Then we know what became of your female," said Wesk.

"Apparently, but what sense does it make? If the Red Wizards want to do something in private, what haven is more private than Delhumide? No one comes here. Conversely, why bother with this dangerous place at all, if you're only using it as a stepping stone to somewhere else?

"

Wesk shrugged. "Maybe we'll find out on the other side."

"Hold on," Thovarr said.

Bareris assumed he meant to point out the recklessness of walking through the gate when they had no idea where it led or what waited beyond, but before the gnoll could get going, a scarlet-robed figure stepped into view through a doorway midway up the left wall. At first, the wizard didn't notice the intruders, and Thovarr had the presence of mind to fall silent. Wesk laid an arrow on his bow.

But as he drew it to his ear, the mage glimpsed the intruders from the corner of his eye, or sensed their presence somehow. He was wise enough not to waste breath and time crying for help that would surely arrive too late to save him, nor did he attempt to scramble back through the doorway as Bareris might have done. Perhaps the space he'd just vacated had only the one exit, and he didn't want to trap himself.

Instead he flourished his hand, and the black ring on his thumb left a streak of shadow on the air. Each gripping a great-sword, four pairs of skeletal arms erupted from the band. They emerged tiny but swelled to full size in a heartbeat.

They were an uncanny sight to behold, and even Wesk faltered for an instant. The Red Wizard snarled words of power, and the bony arms flew at the gnoll and his companions. Ignoring the imminent threat of the greatswords, Wesk shot an arrow at the mage, unfortunately not quickly enough to keep the warlock from finishing his incantation. A floating disk of blue phosphorescence shimmered into being in front of him, and the arrow stuck in that instead, just as if it were a tangible wooden shield.

Then the disembodied arms hurtled into the distance and started cutting with their long, heavy blades. The intruders had the advantage of numbers, but even so, Bareris realized the wizard's protectors would be difficult to defeat. The only

way to stop them or even slow them down was to hit hard and square enough to cleave a length of bone entirely in two, and they flitted through the air so nimbly that it was a challenge to land a stroke at all.

But the necromancer was an even greater threat, and Bareris didn't dare leave him to conjure unmolested. He stepped between a set of skeletal arms and Wesk, ducked a cut, and riposted, buying the gnoll chieftain the moment he needed to drop his bow and ready his axe. After that, though, the bard extricated himself from the whirl of blades and charged the mage who, the

translucent, arrow-pierced disk still hovering between him and his foes, the skirt of his robe flapping around his legs, was himself sprinting toward the white stone archway. Apparently he believed safety, or at least help, awaited him on the other side.

Bareris was too far away to cut him off. He sang a charm so rapidly that he feared botching the precise rhythm and pitch required, but he didn't have the option of taking his time.

Magic groaned through the air, and the section of floor under the Red Wizard's feet bucked as though an earthquake had begun. The vibration knocked the mage staggering then dumped him on his rump. Bareris dashed on, closing in on the warlock while likewise interposing himself between his foe and the portal.

The Red Wizard thrust out his arm. A glyph tattooed on the back of his hand leaped free of his skin and became a hand itself, levitating and seemingly formed of shadow. It bobbed over the top of the floating shield, then streaked at Bareris.

The bard tried to dodge, but the hand grabbed him by the shoulder anyway. Agony stabbed outward from the point of contact to afflict his entire body.

It was the fiercest pain he'd ever experienced, severe enough to blind and paralyze, which was no doubt the object. Evidently still intent on reaching the gate, but looking to finish off his adversary as well, the necromancer

simultaneously circled in the appropriate direction and hissed sibilant rhyming phrases.

The pain is in my mind, Bareris insisted to himself, and I can push it out. He struggled to straighten up, turn in the mage's direction, and lift his sword once more. For a heartbeat, it was impossible, and then the bonds of torment constraining him ripped like a sheet of parchment tearing in two.

He spun around. His eyes widening, the necromancer appeared startled, but the floating shield automatically shifted to defend its creator as thoroughly as possible. Bareris poised himself

as if he meant to dart to the right then dodged left instead. That fooled the shield and brought him within striking distance of the wizard. He drove his point into the other man's chest. The enchanter fell back with his final incantation uncompleted.

Bareris studied the mage for another moment, making sure their duel was truly over, then pivoted to survey the rest of the battle. Two of the gnolls were down, but with a final chop of his axe, Thovarr was reducing the last of the disembodied arms to inert splinters of bone.

His allies' success gave Bareris the opportunity to contemplate the enormity of what he'd done, or the seeming enormity. He'd earned a death by torture the moment he'd lifted his hand to So-Kehur and his skull-masked partner, so in practical terms, it shouldn't matter that he'd now killed a Red Wizard outright.

Yet it gave him pause. The eight orders taught every person and certainly every pauper in Thay to think of their members as superior, invincible beings, and though Bareris's experiences abroad had given him ample reason to feel confident of his own prowess, perhaps a part of him still believed the myth and was accordingly appalled at his temerity, but then a surge of satisfaction washed his trepidation away. After all, these were the bastards who'd

taken Tammith away from him, and this particular specimen didn't look so exalted or omnipotent anymore, did he?

Wesk trotted up to him, bow in hand once more. He had a cut on his forearm where a greatsword must have grazed him, but he wasn't paying it any mind.

\*/donV hear anyone coming,"he said, "doyou?"

Bareris listened. "No. "Evidently the fight hadn't made a great deal of noise. He was glad he hadn't needed to produce any of the prodigious booms or roars of which his magic was capable. He pointed to the gnolls still lying on the floor. "How are they?"

"Dead." If Wesk felt bad about it, no human could have told it from his manner. "So what now?"

"We hide the bodies and what's left of the skeleton arms. With luck, that will buy us more time before anyone else realizes we were here."

"And then we go through the gate?"

Bareris opened his mouth to say yes, then thought better of it. "No. Thovarr's right. We don't know where it leads or what's waiting beyond, but we do know the necromancer believed that if he could reach the other side, it would save him. That means he could have had a lot of allies there. More than we, with half our band already lost, can hope to overcome."

Wesk cocked his head. "You didn't come this far just to give up."

"No, but I'm going on alone, clad in the dead wizard's robe, in the hope that trickery will succeed where force would likely fail."

"Did you notice that the robe has a bloody hole in it? You put it there."

Bareris shrugged. "It's not a big hole and not too bloody. Bodies don't bleed much after the heart stops. If I throw a cloak on over the robe, perhaps no one will notice."

He'd also sing a song to make himself seem more likable and trustworthy, the very antithesis of a person meriting

suspicion, but saw no point in mentioning that. He was still leery of allowing the gnolls to guess the extent to which he'd used magic to manipulate them.

Wesk grunted. "Better, maybe, to disguise yourself with an illusion or be invisible."

"Perhaps, but I don't know those particular songs. Somehow I never had the chance to learn them. Now let's get moving. We need don't anybody else blundering in on us while we stand around talking."

They dragged the bodies to the room from which the Red Wizard had emerged. It turned out to be a small, bare, rectangular space the clergy of Horus-Re might have used to store votive candles, incense, and similar supplies. Bareris wondered what the mage had been doing in here and realized he'd never know.

He was stripping his fellow human's corpse when Wesk exclaimed, "Your hair."

Bareris reflexively raised a hand to touch his tangled, sweaty locks. "Curse it." Like any Mulan who hadn't spent the last several years in foreign lands, the Red Wizards uniformly employed razors, depilatories, or magic to keep themselves bald as stones.

Wesk pulled his knife from its sheath. "I don't suppose you can truly shave without lather and such, but I can shear your hair very short, and the robe has a cowl. Keep it pulled up and maybe you'll pass."

The gnoll proved to be about as gentle a barber as Bareris had expected. He yanked hard on the strands of hair, and the knife stung as it sawed them away. Bareris had no doubt it was nicking him.

"Gnolls take scalps for trophies sometimes," said Wesk. "You make the first cut like this." He laid the edge of his knife against Bareris's forehead just below the hairline.

"I had a hunch that was what you were doing," Bareris replied, and Wesk laughed his crazy, bestial laugh.

When the gnoll finished, Bareris brushed shorn hair off his

shoulders and chest, put on the scarlet robe over his brigandine and breeches, then donned his cloak and sword belt. He hoped he could get away with wearing a sword. Though it wasn't common, he'd seen other Red Wizards do the same. But he realized with regret that he'd have to leave his yarting behind. The musical instrument would simply be too unusual and distinctive.

He handed it to Wesk. "Take this. It's not a ruby, but it'll fetch a good price."

The gnoll archer grinned. "Maybe I'll keep it and learn to play."

"Thank you all for your help. Now clear out of here. Try to be far away by daybreak."

"Good hunting, human. It was good to be a soldier again, even if our army was very small."

The gnolls stalked toward the exit. Singing softly, Bareris headed for the arch.

## Chapter nine

30Mirtul-I Kythorn, the Year of Risen Elfkin

For the briefest of instants, the universe shattered into meaningless sparks and smears of light, and Bareris felt as if he were plummeting. Then his stride carried him clear of the portal, and his lead foot landed on a surface just as solid and level as the floor in Horus-Re's holy of holies. But because his body had believed it was falling, he lurched off balance and had to take a quick step to catch himself.

Seeking to orient himself as rapidly as possible, he peered around. He was in another stone chamber, this one lit by the wavering greenish light of the sort of enchanted torch that burned forever without the heatless flames consuming the wood. It didn't look as though Mulhorandi had built this room. Its trapezoidal shape, the square doorways, and the odd zigzag carvings framing them were markedly different than the architecture of his ancestors or any other culture he knew of.

The portal was a white stone arch on this side too, identical



to

its counterpart. Armed with spears and scimitars, wearing cyclopean-skull-and-four-pointed-star badges that likely proclaimed their fealty to one Red Wizard or another, a pair of blood ores were standing guard over it. They eyed Bareris curiously.

Their scrutiny gave the bard a twinge of fear. Indeed, it inspired a witless urge to whip his sword from its scabbard and try to strike the sentries down before they could raise an alarm. He raked them with a haughty stare instead.

They straightened up as much as their stooped race ever did, thrust out their lances with the shafts perpendicular to their extended arms, drew them back, and pounded the butts on the floor. It was a salute, and Bareris breathed a sigh of relief that he'd deceived the first creatures he'd encountered anyway.

One guard, afflicted with a runny walleye that rendered it even homelier than the common run of ore, looked back at the portal expectantly. When no one else emerged, it asked, "No slaves this time, Master?"

"No," Bareris said. "I traveled on ahead carrying word of how many you're getting and when. It should help with the planning." He hoped his improvisation made at least a little sense.

The ore's mouth twisted. "You need to see the whelp, then."

The whelp? What in the name of the Binder's quill did that mean? "The one in charge," he said warily.

The ore nodded. "That Xingax thing. The whelp is what we call it." It hesitated. "Maybe we shouldn't, but it's not one of you masters. It's . . . what it is."

"I understand," Bareris said, wishing it were true. "Where is it?"

"Somewhere up top. That'll take you up." The ore used its spear to point to a staircase behind one of the square doorways.

Bareris started to say thank you, until it occurred to him that

the average Red Wizard probably didn't bother showing courtesy to ores. "Got it." He turned away.

"Master?"

Breathing more quickly, fearful he'd betrayed himself somehow, the bard pivoted back around. "What?"

"I don't mean to bother you. I wouldn't, except you haven't been here before, have you? I understand you're a wizard, and ten times wiser than the likes of me, but you know to protect yourself before you go close to Xingax, don't you?"

"Of course," Bareris lied, wondering what sort of protection would serve and hoping he wouldn't need it. Given the choice, he'd steer well clear of "the whelp," whatever it was.

He discovered that the room above the arch connected to a series of catwalks that apparently allowed one to make a full circuit of the various lofts and balconies without ever descending to the more extensive and contiguous system of chambers and corridors comprising the primary level below. Unlike the rest of the stronghold, the walkways appeared to be of recent construction, and it seemed plain the Red Wizards—or rather, their servants—had expended a fair amount of effort building them, which was odd, considering that Bareris didn't see anyone else moving around up here.

Peculiar or not, their vacancy was a blessing. It allowed him to explore without venturing near to anyone who might penetrate his disguise, and in time he came to suspect the advantage was essential. Viewed up close, his face might have betrayed horror and disgust no matter how he tried to conceal them.

He soon concluded from the complete absence of windows that he was underground. Stinking of incense and carrion, the chilly vaults felt old, perhaps even older than Delhumide, and like the haunted city, breathed an aura of perversity and danger. Unlike Delhumide, however, the catacombs bustled with activity. Necromancers chanted over corpses and skeletons, which then clambered to their feet, the newly made zombies clumsily, the bone men with

clinking agility. Warriors drilled the undead in the use of mace and spear, just as if the creatures were youths newly recruited into the legions. Ghouls practiced charging on command to shred straw dummies with fang and claw. A half dozen shadows listened as, its face a carnival of oozing, eyeless rot beneath its raised visor, a corpse armored in plate expounded on strategy and tactics. Anyone but a necromancer would likely have found it ghastly, but it was inexplicable as well. The Red Wizards were free to turn their slaves into undead men-at-arms if they so desired. They created such monstrosities all the time. Thus, Bareris wondered anew: Why the secrecy?

Though he still didn't care. Not really. All that mattered was spiriting Tammith away from this nightmarish place before her captors could alter her.

He refused to entertain the notion that perhaps they already had until he found his way to a platform overlooking a crypt housing dozens of listless, skinny, ragged folk with the whip scars and unshorn hair of thralls. Bareris scrutinized them all in turn, then peered into every empty shadow and corner, and none of the prisoners was Tammith.

His nerves taut, he marched onward, striding faster, no longer concerned that his boots would make too much noise on the planking beneath them or that haste would make him appear suspicious to anyone looking up from below. He gazed down into chamber after chamber and felt grateful the catacombs were so extensive. Until he ran out of spaces to check, he could still hope. But at the same time, he hated that the warren was big and labyrinthine enough to so delay his determination of the truth.

He passed through yet another newly cut doorway then at last he saw her, lying on her back on the floor of an otherwise empty room with a scatter of earth around and beneath her. Sleeping, surely, for she displayed no marks to prove otherwise. No wounds, and none of the bloat or lividity of a corpse.

"Tammith!" he called, trying to make his voice loud enough to wake her but not so loud as to be overheard outside the chamber.

She didn't stir. He called again, louder, and still she didn't respond.

He trembled and swallowed, refusing to believe someone had killed her with a poison or spell that didn't leave a mark, recently enough that her body hadn't yet started to deteriorate. It simply couldn't be so.

Except that he knew it very well could.

There were no stairs in this particular room. He swung himself over the guardrail and dropped, as, in what had come to seem a different life and a brighter world, he'd once leaped from the deck of a ship onto a dock in Bezantur.

The landing jarred but didn't injure him. He rushed to Tammith, knelt, and touched her cheek. Her skin was as cool as he'd feared it would be. His voice breaking, he spoke her name once more.

Her eyes flew open. He felt an incredulous, overpowering joy, and then she reached up and seized him by the throat.

In one respect at least, the temple of Kossuth in Escalant was like most other human households: Nearly everyone slept away the time just before dawn. That was why Hezass Nymia, tharchion of Lapendrar and Eternal Flame of the god's house, chose that time to lead his four golems on a circuit of the principal altars. Carved of deep brown Thayan oak to resemble men-at-arms, the glow of the myriad sacred fires reflecting from their polished surfaces, the automata had been fashioned first and foremost to fight as archers, and their longbows were a part of their bodies. Hezass had them carrying sacks in their free hands.

Lifeless and mindless, the golems were tireless as well. Yawning, Hezass envied them that and wondered if this surreptitious transit was truly necessary. He was, after all, the high priest of the pyramidal temple and so entitled to his pick of the offerings the faithful gave to the Firelord.

It was the accepted custom, but custom likewise decreed that the hierophant should exercise restraint. One could argue that such self-control was particularly desirable if the previous Eternal Flame, proving not so eternal after all, had fallen to his death under mysterious circumstances, and the current one had somehow managed to secure his appointment even though several other priests were further advanced in the mysteries of the faith.

Yes, all in all, it was best to avoid the appearance of greed, Hezass thought with a wry smile, but the truth was, he had little hope of avoiding the reality. He coveted as much as he coveted, and he meant to have it. Better then to do some of his skimming when no censorious eyes were watching.

The golems' wooden feet clacking faintly on the marble floor, the little procession arrived at another altar, where women often prayed to conceive, or if they had, for an easy delivery and a healthy baby. Hezass picked up a string of pearls, scrutinized it, and put it back. He liked to think he had as good an eye as any jeweler, and he could see the necklace was second-rate. The delicate platinum tiara, on the other hand, was exquisite.

Responsive to his unspoken will, one of the golems proffered its sack, but since it only had the one functional hand, Hezass had to pull open the mouth of the bag and drop the headdress in himself. As porters, the constructs had their limitations, but their inability to speak made up for them.

"That is a nice piece," drawled a masculine voice.

Startled, Hezass nearly whirled around but caught himself in time. Better to move in a leisurely fashion, with a dignity befitting an Eternal Flame and tharchion, like a man who hadn't gotten caught doing anything illicit. He turned to meet the dark-eyed, sardonic gaze of a gaunt figure whose capacious scarlet sleeves currently concealed his withered fingers.

Hezass dropped to his knees. "Your Omnipotence."

"It looks Impilturan," Szass Tam continued. "Brides from

wealthy families often wear such ornaments on their wedding days. Please, stand up."

Hezass did so, meanwhile wondering what this unexpected intrusion portended. "I haven't had the honor of meeting with Your Omnipotence in some time."

"We've both been busy," said the lich, sauntering closer, the hem of his red robe whispering along the floor, "but you're awake, I'm always awake, most of the rest of the world is asleep, so this seems a convenient moment for us to talk."

Hezass wondered how Szass Tam had known he was awake and precisely where to find him. "I'm at your service, of course."

"Thank you." The necromancer casually pulled a crystal-pointed enchanted arrow from a golem's quiver, examined it, and dropped it back in. "I admit, it concerns me a little to find you out of bed. If you're suffering from insomnia, I know a potion that will help."

"I'm fine," said Hezass. "I'm just getting a head start on my duties."

The wizard nodded. "I can see that, though technically, it's arguable whether pilfering from the offerings constitutes a duty."

Hezass forced a smile. "Your Omnipotence always did have a keen sense of humor. You know, surely, that I'm entitled to my share."

"Oh, absolutely, but if you start claiming it while the coins and other valuables still lie on display atop the altars, before the clerks make their tally, doesn't that mean you underreport the take to the Flaming Brazier and send Eltabbar less than its fair share? If so, isn't that the equivalent of robbing the Firelord himself? I'm afraid Iphegor Nath would think so. He might try to punish you even if you are a tharchion, and who's to say he wouldn't succeed? He's made a considerable contribution to the campaign against the undead horde in the east, and we zulkirs are accordingly grateful."

Hezass drew a long, steadying breath. "Master, you know that even if there's anything ... irregular about my conduct as Eternal Flame, it's no worse than the way other folk in authority behave every day across the length and breadth of the realm. You also knew what sort of man I am when you helped me rise in the church and later gave me Lapendrar to govern."

"That's true," said Szass Tam, "and I'll tell you a secret: It doesn't bother me if you dare to rob a god. Do the gods deal with us so kindly or even justly as to merit abject devotion?" He waved his hand at the offerings on the altar. "Look at all this—not the gold and gems that usually catch your eye, but the copper, bread, and fruit. Needy women have given what they could ill afford, perhaps all they possessed, to bribe your god, yet he won't answer all their prayers. Some petitioners will remain barren or perish in childbirth even so. Why is that, and what's the sense of a world where it's possible for women to miscarry and infants to die in their cribs in the first place?"

Hezass had no idea what the necromancer was talking about or how to respond. "Master, you understand I share a true bond with Kossuth even if I do pocket a few too many of the trinkets the faithful offer him. He forgives me my foibles, I believe. Anyway, the world is what it is. Isn't it?"

Szass Tam smiled. His expression had a hint of wistfulness about it, the look, just conceivably, of someone who'd briefly hoped to find a kindred spirit and been disappointed.

"Indeed it

is, and I didn't mean to cast aspersions on your creed or bore you with philosophy either. Let's focus on practical concerns."

"With respect, Your Omnipotence, your 'practical concern' seems to be to blackmail me, but why? I have no choice but to do whatever a zulkir commands, and beyond that, I'm grateful for everything you've done for me. I'm happy to aid you in return."

"Your loyalty shames me," the lich replied, and if he was speaking ironically, neither his voice nor his lean, intellectual features betrayed it. "If only everyone were as faithful, but 'the world is what it is,' and with the council of zulkirs divided against itself, even I sometimes find it expedient to make it clear to folk that, just as I reward those who cooperate with me, so too do I have ways of rebuking those who refuse."

Hezass smiled. "You've covered the rebuking part. Now I'd like to hear about the reward."

The dead man laughed. A whiff of decay escaped his open mouth, and Hezass made sure his features didn't twist in repugnance.

"As one of your peers recently reminded me," Szass Tam said, "the miners dig prodigious quantities of gold out of the mountains of High Thay."

"So I understand," Hezass said.

"At present, most of it comes down to the Plateau via the road that runs east. That's natural, since it's really the only highway worthy of the name, but I see no fundamental reason why more gold couldn't move west and south, following the courses of the rivers, perhaps with magical aid to see the caravans safely over the difficult patches, and obviously, if it does, it will descend into Lapendrar. You can tax it as it passes from hand to hand and turn a nice profit thereby."

"A nice profit" was an understatement. Hezass suspected that over the course of several years, he might amass a fortune to rival Samas Kul's. "You truly could arrange it?"

"Why not? Pyras Autorian is my friend, no less than you."

More, actually, Hezass thought. He was Szass Tarn's confederate, or to be honest about it, his underling. Pyras Autorian was purely and simply the lich's puppet, a docile dunce who did exactly and only what his master told him to do, which suddenly seemed like quite an admirable quality, since it meant there was no doubt Szass Tam could deliver



on his offer.

"What must I do," Hezass asked, "to start all this gold cascading down from the heights?"

"Quite possibly nothing, but here's what I'll require if it turns out I need anything at all... "

Tammith's fingers dug into Bareris's neck as if she'd acquired an ogre's strength. Her mouth opened to reveal canine teeth lengthening into fangs. She started to drag him down.

He tried to plead with her, but her fingers cut off his wind and denied him his voice. He punched her in the face, but the blow just made her snarl. It didn't stun her or loosen her grip on him.

At last he recalled a trick one of his former comrades, a warrior monk of Ilmater and an expert wrestler, had taught him. Supposedly a man could use it to break free of any stranglehold, no matter how strong his opponent.

He swept his arm in the requisite circular motion and just managed to knock her hand away, though a flash of pain told him it had taken some of his skin along with it, lodged beneath her nails. She immediately grabbed for him again, but he threw himself back beyond her reach.

He scrambled to his feet and so did she. "Don't you know me?" he wheezed. "It's Bareris."

She glided forward, but not straight toward him. She was maneuvering to interpose herself between him and the door. He drew his sword. "Stop. I don't want to hurt you, but you have to keep away."

Rather to his surprise, she did stop. A master sword smith had forged and enchanted the blade, giving it the ability to cut foes largely impervious to common weapons, and perhaps the creature Tammith had become could sense the threat of the magic bound in the steel.

"That's good," Bareris said. "Now look at me. I know you recognize me. You and I—"

Her body exploded into smaller, darker shapes. Astonished,

he froze for an instant as the bats hurtled at him.

His fear screamed at him to cut at the flying creatures. He yanked off his cloak and flailed at them with it instead, fighting to fend them off while he sang.

Something jabbed his arm and then the top of his head. Bats were lighting on him and biting him despite his efforts to keep them away. He struggled to ignore the pain and horror of it lest they disrupt the precise articulation the spell required.

The bats abruptly spun away from him as if a whirlwind had caught them. In fact, they were suffering the effects of the same charm that had repelled the enormous fleas. It was supposed to work on any sort of vermin, and apparently even creatures like these were susceptible.

The bats swirled together and became Tammith once more. Her fangs shortened into normal-looking teeth, and her face twisted in anguish. "I'm sorry!" she whispered. "I'm sorry."

He inferred that his magic had done what his punch could not: Shock her out of her predatory frenzy and restore her to something approximating sanity. He sheathed his blade, put his cloak back on, extended his hand, and stepped toward her.

"It's all right," he said.

She recoiled. "Stay away! I don't want to hurt you." "Then you won't."

"I will. Even though I ... fed on poor Yuldra already. Something about who you are, what we are to each other, makes it worse. Don't you understand what's happened to me?"

He realized he was reluctant to say the word "vampire," as if speaking it aloud would seal the curse for eternity. "I have some idea, but what magic can do, it can undo. People say the holiest priests even know rituals to . . . restore the dead to life. We just have to get you away from here, and then we'll find the help you need."

She shook her head. "No one can help me, and even if

somebody could, I'm not able to go to him. I'm more of a slave now than I was before Xingax changed me. He chained my mind, bound me to serve the wizards and their cause."

"Maybe I can at least do something about that. It wouldn't be the first enchantment I've broken with a song."

"You can't break this one. Get away from here while you still can."

"No. I won't leave without you."

She glared at him. "Why not? You abandoned me before."

Her sudden anger shocked him. "That's not true. I left Bezantur to make us a future."

"Well, this is the one you made for me."

"That isn't so. I'm going to save you. Just trust—"

A voice sounded from overhead: "What are you doing in here?"

Bareris looked up to behold the most grotesque creature he'd ever seen. Riding on the back of what appeared to be a zombie hill giant, the thing looked like a man-sized, festering, and grossly malformed infant or fetus. He surmised that it could only be Xingax, "the whelp."

Bareris reminded himself that he was still wearing a red robe and still cloaked in an enchantment devised to quell suspicion and inspire good will in others. In addition to that, Xingax was

squinting down at him as if the mismatched eyes in his lopsided face didn't see particularly well. Perhaps this encounter needn't be disastrous.

The bard lowered his gaze once more. He hoped Xingax would take it for a gesture of respect, or a natural human response to profound ugliness, and not an attempt to keep the creature from getting a better look at an unfamiliar face.

"I was just curious to see what you'd made of the slave."

"Do I know you?"

A bead of sweat oozed down Bareris's brow. He wished he knew the proper attitude to assume. Was Xingax a servant, something a supposed Red Wizard should treat with the

same arrogance he showed to most creatures, or did the abomination expect a degree of deference?

"I'm new. So far, I'm just performing routine tasks. Creating zombies and the like."

"I see. What's your name?"

"Toriak Kakanos."

"Well, Toriak, let's have a decent look at your face, so I'll know you in the future."

Bareris reluctantly complied. When his eyes met Xingax's, a malignant power stabbed into the core of him, searing and shaking him with spasms of debilitating pain. He crumpled to the floor.

"It was a good try," Xingax said, "but I meet all the wizards as soon as they come through the portal. Is it possible this is ... what was the name?... never mind. The bard who tried to rescue you before."

"Yes," Tammith groaned.

"Drink from him and try to change him as the ritual changed you. It's another good test of your new abilities."

Bareris fought to control his breathing then started singing under his breath.

"Please," Tammith said, "don't make me do it."

"Why not?" Xingax replied. "Don't you love him? Wouldn't you rather he continue on still able to think, feel, and remember? Isn't that better than making him a mindless husk?"

"No!"

The whelp snorted. "I'll never understand the human perspective. It's so perverse. Even so, it grieves me to deny my daughter's request, but the truth of the matter is, if this fellow wields bardic magic, survived a battle with Muthoth, So-Kehur, and their guards, and found his way to our secret home, then, like yours, his courage and talents are too valuable to waste. I must insist you transform him. You'll thank me later."

Haltingly, as though still struggling against the compulsion,

Tammith advanced on Bareris.

Her resistance gave him time to complete his song, and its power washed the pain and weakness from his body. The question was, what to do next?

He was sure he had no hope of defending himself against Tammith and Xingax simultaneously. He had to neutralize one of them fast, before either realized he'd shaken off the effect of the fetus-thing's poison gaze, and unfortunately, Tammith was both the more immediate threat and the one within reach of his sword.

Despite what she'd become, striking the blow was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but he wanted to survive and do so as a living man, not an undead monstrosity, so he leaped to his feet and drove his sword into her stomach.

The stroke would have killed any ordinary human, if not instantly, then after a period of crippling agony, but if the tales he'd heard were true, a vampire would survive it. He prayed it was so, and he prayed too that the wound would incapacitate her long enough to make a difference.

He yanked his sword free of her flesh, and she doubled over clutching at the gash. Making sure he didn't look up and meet Xingax's gaze again, he dashed for the doorway. The catwalk banged as the giant zombie lumbered after him.

The huge corpse had longer legs than he did. Aware that he was running short of spells, he nonetheless sang a charm to quicken his stride. It might be the only hope he had of keeping ahead of his pursuers.

Of course, it likely wouldn't be long before he blundered into some of Xingax's allies, at which point the fetus-thing would yell for them to stop him. Then, with new foes in front of him and his current ones pounding up behind, it would make no difference how fast he could run.

He halted, lifted his head, and shouted. The blast of sound jolted and splintered the section of catwalk immediately in front of the huge zombie. Its next heavy stride stamped a hole in the weakened planks, and then it crashed through

altogether, carrying its rider along with it.

The two creatures slammed down hard in a clattering shower of broken wood. Bareris didn't expect the fall to destroy the zombie outright, but he dared to hope he'd damaged it and maybe slain the feeble-looking Xingax.

The zombie tried to rise and the whelp slipped from its shoulders. Evidently he couldn't hold on anymore. The undead giant fell back on top of him when one of its legs buckled beneath it.

Bareris could scarcely believe how well the trick had worked. How lucky he'd been. He sprinted on, found a staircase, climbed to the catwalks, and headed for the portal. He'd just promised Tammith he wouldn't leave her here, but the plain truth was now he had to get away or die, quite possibly when she murdered him herself. He vowed to himself that he'd return and next time rescue her. Somehow. Somehow.

His guts churned, his vision blurred, and a pang of headache jabbed through his skull. Something was making him ill. He cast about for the source of his distress and saw nothing.

He recalled his ore informant warning him that a person needed protection merely to come into proximity with Xingax. Could that possibly be what ailed him? If so, where was the whelp? A sudden blast of cold coated the right side of his body with frost and chilled him to the core. He'd seen battle mages conjure such attacks. Shaking, he looked for cover and found none within reach. He turned to see where the magic had originated.

Visible now, Xingax floated in empty air a few yards away from the catwalk. Obviously, the fall hadn't killed him, and he didn't actually need the zombie to carry him around. He certainly hadn't had any difficulty catching up to Bareris.

Stricken as he was, the bard almost looked into the abomination's eyes before recalling he mustn't. At the last possible instant, he averted his gaze.

Not that it was likely to matter. He'd drained his reserves of magic nearly dry, and his twisted little infant's mouth

leering, Xingax was hovering out of reach of his blade. From that position, the fetus-creature could throw spell after spell without fear of effective reprisal.

Bareris could only think of one ploy to attempt, and it was nowhere near as clever as breaking the catwalk had been. In fact, it was as old as any trick in the world, but it would have to serve. He allowed himself to collapse onto the walkway and lay motionless thereafter.

A wary foe might suspect he was merely feigning death or unconsciousness and continue smiting him at range. If Xingax took that tactic, he was finished.

But maybe the abomination wouldn't be that cautious. He seemed smugly confident of his own powers and likewise devoted to his work. He might be reluctant to kill Bareris here and now

and settle for reanimating him as a zombie when it could still be possible to turn him into a more powerful undead.

I'm helpless, Bareris thought. Sick. Frozen. Dead. Just come closer and you'll see.

As if heeding his silent entreaties, Xingax floated over to hang directly over him. One larger and set higher than the other, his dark eyes squinted.

Striving to deny sickness and injury their grip of him, bellowing a war cry to infuse himself with vigor and resolve, Bareris sprang to his feet. Still doing his best to avoid looking into Xingax's eyes, he cut open the creature's chest. Xingax gave an ear-splitting screech like the cry of the baby he so resembled. Bareris slashed away a flap of flesh from one of the creature's cheeks.

The fetus-thing started to fly away from the catwalk. Bareris lunged and caught the dangling length of cold, slimy umbilicus. It threatened to slide out of his fingers, but he clamped down tight, twisted it around his wrist, and held Xingax in place as if the latter were a dog straining at a leash.

He kept on cutting and thrusting. Xingax hurled another

blaze of chill from his small, decaying hands, but Bareris discerned his intent, twisted aside and evaded the worst of it then retaliated by lopping off one of the outthrust extremities at the wrist. His next cut sliced the smaller of the creature's eyes.

The whelp screamed and vanished, leaving a segment of gray rotting birth cord behind in Bareris's fingers. His final wail echoed.

Fearful that his foe had simply become invisible once more, Bareris pivoted and slashed at the air all around him. His blade failed to find a target, and in another moment, he realized he felt better. Xingax truly had departed, evidently translating himself instantaneously through space and taking his aura of sickness along with him.

Unfortunately, that didn't fix the chill burns on Bareris's skin. With luck, his healing songs would keep the injured patches from turning into genuine frostbite and gangrene, but he didn't have the magic or time to spare to attempt it now. He cast away the section of umbilicus, brushed rime from his garments, and strode in the direction of the portal, until he heard a commotion up ahead.

Then he realized that Xingax, surmising his foe would make for the magical gate, had transported himself there when he fled, where he'd no doubt arranged for some of his minions to guard the portal with special care while the rest scoured the catacombs for the man who'd maimed him.

Bareris struggled to suppress a surge of panic, telling himself there had to be another way out of here, wherever here was. He just had to find it.

He threw away his cloak. At a distance, the brown mantle was probably more conspicuous than the bloody rent in his robe. He hid his sword and sword belt beneath the voluminous crimson garment. Then he hurried away from the sound of the searchers and toward a portion of the maze of vaults and tunnels he had yet to explore.

Eventually he spotted a subtle change in the ambient



illumination up ahead. He rounded a corner and saw a trapezoidal opening with a ray of wan light shining through. Puzzling as it seemed, given his near-certainty that he was underground, the wizards' lair possessed a window after all. He lowered himself from the catwalk by his hands, dropped, stuck his head out the opening, and then he understood. The vaults were adjacent to a wide cylindrical shaft plunging deep into bedrock. He'd heard stories of an ancient people who'd excavated well-like fortresses in the Sunrise Mountains. Apparently they'd dug out at least one city as well, constructed on a grander scale, and he was standing in it. The morning sun

hadn't yet risen high enough to shine straight down into the central vacancy, but even so, the light reflecting down from the gray clouds revealed other windows, as well as doorways connecting to chiseled balconies and staircases.

Intending to locate one of those doors, he turned, then heard his pursuers once more. They were manifestly closing in. Before, the noise they'd made had simply been a drone. Now he could make out some of the words that one ore was growling to another.

Bareris realized he didn't dare spend any more time in the tunnels looking for anything. He had to get out now, so he clambered out the window feet first.

He was no expert climber, and fatigue and the flare of cold had stolen a measure of his strength, but fortunately, the ancient builders hadn't polished the walls of the shaft smooth, or if they had, time had come along behind them and roughened them again. There were hand- and footholds to be had, and refusing to look down at the gulf yawning beneath him, the bard hauled himself upward.

Finally he reached one of the spiraling staircases. He dragged himself onto the steps, lay on his belly for a moment panting and trembling, then forced himself to rise and skulk onward.

In time he spotted a pair of human guards at the top of the

steps. As best he could judge, no one had alerted them that an intruder had penetrated the catacombs below, for they appeared more bored than vigilant and were looking outward, not down the stairs.

Trying to be silent, Bareris drew his sword from beneath his robe and held it behind his back. Then he crept on.

Despite his efforts at stealth, one of the sentries apparently heard him coming. The warrior turned, and reacting to the sight of a red robe, he began to salute with his spear as the ores at the portal had.

Then, his eyes widening, he exclaimed, "What's this?" and leveled the weapon.

Bareris charged, knocked the lance out of line with his sword, and drove the blade into the warrior's chest. Where it stuck fast as the other spearman attacked. Bareris let go of the hilt, twisted to avoid his adversary's thrust, grabbed him, and shoved him off the edge of the landing. Shrieking, the warrior plummeted down the well.

His pulse hammering in his neck, Bareris peered about. He was on top of a mountain, with brown, jagged peaks rising on every side to stab the overcast sky, and except for the subterranean city he'd just exited and a well-trodden trail running down the rocky slopes from the lip of the shaft, no sign of human habitation anywhere. He still suspected he was in the Sunrise Mountains, but he'd never even seen them before, and he knew that in fact, he could be anywhere.

At least he had the dawn to give him his directions. He'd head west, south, and/or downward, depending on which was most practical at a given moment, and hope to find his way to the Pass of Thazar or one of the eastern tharchs. He saw little choice but to try. By all accounts, a lone man couldn't survive in these mountains for long.

To his disappointment, the dead warrior at his feet wasn't carrying any food, but he did have a leather water bottle. Bareris appropriated that, his spear, and his cloak. Spring

had come to the lowlands, but up here the wind whistling out of the north was cold, and the night would be colder still. Once he'd outfitted himself as well as he was able, he trotted down the trail. It was the best way to distance himself from the wizards' stronghold, the fastest, easiest way to travel, but he'd need to forsake the path in just a little while, because his foes would come after him, and his only hope of evading them was to vanish into the trackless crags and gorges.

## Chapter ten

### 4-5 Kythorn, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Aoth looked around the table at Nymia Focar, his fellow captains, and an assortment of high-ranking Burning Braziers and Red Wizards. Many of his comrades looked tired, and tight mouths and clenched jaws revealed the determination to participate in the council of war despite the ache of one's wounds. Yet everyone seemed happy as well, whether expansively or quietly, and the singing and whooping outside the hall mirrored the mood of satisfaction within.

It was the satisfaction that came with victory. Upon learning the undead had in fact assaulted the sizable town of Thazrumaros and overrun the eastern half of it, Nymia had hastily reunited the greater part of her army to attack the creatures in their turn, and though the battle had claimed the lives of a number of Thayan warriors, in the end, she'd prevailed.

Now the common soldiers were celebrating, drinking the town dry and bedding every woman who felt moved to so reward

its saviors. Aoth wished he were reveling with them.

Leaning on a crutch, his leg splinted, an officer hobbled in and took the last available chair. The yellow lamplight gleaming on the rings in her ears and the stud in her nose, Nymia sat up straighter, tacitly signaling that she was ready to begin. The drone of casual conversation died.

"My good friends," Nymia said, "you scarcely need me to tell you what your valor has accomplished over the course of the past several days. I've just received a message from Milsantos Damos, and he and his troops have been similarly successful, cleansing the southern part of Pyarados as we've cleansed the north."

Everyone exclaimed and applauded, and Aoth supposed he might as well clap with them. It was good news, as far as it went.

When they'd all had their fill of self-congratulation, Nymia continued. "It's plain that when we combine Thayan arms, Thayan wizardry, and Kossuth's holy fire, these ghouls and specters are no match for us, so I propose to finish destroying them as expeditiously as possible. It's time to join forces with Tharchion Damos, drive up the Pass of Thazar, and retake the keep. I only need to know how soon your companies can be ready to march."

The war leaders began to discuss how many casualties they'd sustained, how much flour and salt pork and how many crossbow bolts remained in the supply wagons, and all the other factors that determined an army's ability to travel and fight. Maybe, thought Aoth, he should leave it at that.

For after all, every other face at the table was a long, fair-complexioned, indisputably Mulan visage. Every other captain had more experience as an officer. Every other wizard was a Red Wizard. Thus, it was unlikely that his opinion would weigh very heavily with anyone.

Still, he felt it was his duty to voice it.

He raised his hand to attract Nymia's attention. "Yes," she said, smiling, "Aoth, what is it?"

He found he needed to clear his throat before proceeding. "I'm concerned that when we talk about rushing up the pass as fast as we can, or of the enemy as if their final defeat were a certainty, that we aren't taking the threat seriously enough."

Nymia cocked her head. "I take it very seriously. That's why,

after our initial setbacks, I recruited the help required to deal with it."

"I know, but there's still a lot we don't understand."

"Of course—exactly where the undead came from, and why they decided to descend on us now. Perhaps we'll find out in due course, but do we actually need to know to defeat them? Judging from our recent successes, I'd say no."

"With respect, Tharchion, it's more than that. I told you about the fall of Thazar Keep, and the priest who wielded so much power against the undead. None of the creatures should have been able to stand against him, yet something struck him down."

One of the senior Burning Braziers, a burly, middle-aged man with tattooed orange and yellow flames crawling up his neck, snorted. "Are you well-versed in the mysteries of faith, Captain?"

"No," said Aoth, "but I know overwhelming mystical force when I see it, whether the source is arcane or divine."

"What, specifically, was the source in this instance?" asked the fire priest. "Which god did this paragon serve?"

"Bane."

"Oh, well, Bane." The Burning Brazier's tone suggested that all deities other than his own were insignificant, and his fellow clerics chuckled.

Nymia looked at Aoth. She was still smiling, but with less warmth than before. "I understand why you're concerned, but

we already knew the enemy has special ways of striking at our priests, and we've already taken special measures to protect them. Is there anything else?"

Just let it go, thought Aoth, but what he said was, "Yes. Have you noticed the particular nature of the creatures we've been fighting of late?"

Idly fingering one of the bones comprising his necklace, Urhur Hahpet grinned and shook his head. "Unless I'm mistaken, they were undead, the very entities we set out to

fight."

"At one point," Aoth replied, "you, my lord, asked me what could be learned by confronting our foes at close quarters instead of simply burning them from a distance. After pondering the matter, I'm now able to tell you. For the most part, the creatures we've been destroying were zombies, ghouls, and shadows. Nasty foes but familiar ones, and often plainly the reanimated remains of farmers, villagers, and even animals the marauders slaughtered, not members of the original horde."

Nymia frowned. "Meaning what?"

"That the work we've done so far was necessary, but we've yet to inflict much harm on our true foe. The marauders' strength is still essentially intact. They still have their nighthaunt, most of their skin kites, diggers, and quells, and the rest of the strange creatures we don't really know how to fight."

Nymia looked to the necromancers. "You're the authorities on these horrors. Is it possible Aoth is right?"

Urhur shrugged. "I agree, we've destroyed relatively few of the exotic specimens, but it's conceivable that Tharchion Damos has encountered more of them and also that we overestimated their numbers to begin with." He gave Aoth a condescending smile. "If so, you're not to blame. It can be difficult for anyone not an expert to tell the various species of undead apart, and the terror and chaos of a massacre would impair almost anybody's ability to make an accurate count."

"My ores fished some water ghouls out of the river," a captain said. "They count as 'exotic,' don't they?"

"I'd say so," Urhur replied. "At any rate, the essential point is this: Yes, we're facing a few rare and formidable creatures, but as Tharchion Focar said, we're prepared to deal with them. In the final analysis, no undead can withstand the magic specially devised to command or destroy its kind, or to give credit where it's due, Kossuth's fire, either."

"All I'm suggesting," said Aoth, "is that we proceed cautiously."

"We will," Nymia said briskly, "but proceed we must, and never stop until we've purged Pyarados of this plague, which brings us back around to the question of just how soon we can head into the pass."

Realizing it would be fruitless to argue any further, Aoth at last managed to hold his tongue.

After the council of war broke up, he tried to join the merrymaking in the streets, only to make the depressing discovery that it failed to divert him as in days of yore. Wondering why anyone ever aspired to become an officer, nipping from a bottle of sour white wine, he prowled aimlessly and watched other folk wallowing in their pleasures.

Finally, his meandering steps led him back to the home in which he and Brightwing were billeted. The griffon perched atop the gabled roof. When she caught sight of him, she spread her wings and half-leaped, half-glided down to the street. A stray mongrel that evidently hadn't discerned her presence hitherto yipped and ran.

"How did it go?" Brightwing asked.

Aoth grinned a mirthless grin. "About as well as I expected. Nymia's desperate to prove her competence and avert the zulkirs' displeasure. Everybody else is proud of himself for besting a terrible foe. Accordingly, no one was in the mood to hear that

we've only won a few petty skirmishes, with all the battles that matter still to come."

Brightwing gave her head a scornful toss. "I don't understand how humans can ignore the truth just because it's unwelcome."

Aoth sighed. "Maybe the others are right and I'm wrong. What do I know anyway?"

"Usually, not much, but this time, you're the one with his eyes open. What will you do now?"

Aoth blinked in surprise at the question. "Follow orders and hope for the best. What else can a soldier do?"

"If he serves in the Griffon Legion, he can fly south and speak his mind to this Milsantos Daramos."

Aoth realized it could conceivably work. Pyarados was Nymia's domain to govern, but as tharchion of Thazalhar, Milsantos was her equal in rank, and since she herself had asked him to participate in the current campaign, they shared authority in the muddled fashion that, the war mage abruptly realized, had hampered Thayan military endeavors for as long as he could remember.

In this case, however, it might prove beneficial. If he could convince Tharchion Daramos of the validity of his concerns, the old warrior could then pressure his fellow governor to adjust her strategy, and it seemed possible if not probable that Nymia actually would heed him. Aoth had never met the man, but of all the tharchions, he had the reputation for being the canniest commander, and the most sensible in general.

Yet...

"I can't," he said. "Nymia Focar is my tharchion. It would be an act of disloyalty for me to run to another commander with my concerns. To the Abyss with it. This is a strong army and we'll win. We may pay a heavier price for our victory than Nymia anticipates, but we'll have it in the end."

Brightwing grunted, an ambiguous sound that might signify acquiescence, disapproval, or both at once.

Aoth resolved to put his misgivings out of his mind. "I wish I knew where Chathi's gone," he said.

"Why, nowhere," she replied.

He turned. The priestess stood in the house's doorway with a pewter goblet in either hand. She wore only a robe, open all the way down the front, though the night obscured all but a tantalizing suggestion of what the gap would otherwise reveal.

Aoth felt a grin stretch across his face. "I thought you'd be



off somewhere celebrating with everybody else."

"I hoped that if I waited for you, we could have a sweeter time together. Was I wrong?"

"No," said Aoth, "you were right as blue skies and green grass." He strode to her, and enfolded in her arms, he did indeed succeed in forgetting all about the undead. At least for a while.

Though he'd known her for twenty years, Aznar Thrul had never beheld the face of Shabella, high priestess of Mask, god of larceny and shadow, and mistress of the thieves' guild of Bezantur. Every time he'd seen her, she'd worn a black silk mask and hooded gray woolen cloak over the rainbow-colored tunic beneath.

That, of course, was simply the way of the Maskarran, and it had never bothered him before. Now it did. What, he wondered, if this isn't the same woman with whom I've conspired for all these years? What if someone else, some agent of my enemies, killed her and took her place? Even if I unmasked her, I wouldn't know.

Ttying to push such groundless fancies out of his mind, he scowled at her across the length of the small room he used for private audiences, and as a servant closed the door behind her, she bowed deeply, spreading the wings of her cape.

He left her in that position for several heartbeats, rather hoping it pained her middle-aged back muscles but knowing it probably didn't. Though she likely hadn't committed a robbery with her own hands in a long while, her position required her to train to maintain the skills and athleticism of an all-around master thief, and he had little doubt that she could still scale sheer walls and lift latches with the ablest burglars and stalk and club a victim like the most accomplished muggers.

"Get up," Aznar said at last. "Tell me what's happening in the streets." He already knew, but the question was a way of starting the conversation.

"The common folk," she said, "are celebrating the good news from Pyarados." As always, her soft soprano voice sounded gentle and wistful, belying the iron resolve and ferocity she displayed when circumstances warranted.

" 'The good news,' " he parroted. "Meaning what, precisely?"

"That the legions are pushing back the undead."

"In the opinion of the mob, who deserves the credit for their success?"

Most people hesitated before telling Aznar Thrul something he didn't want to hear. Shabella never did, and that was one of the things that made him if not like at least respect her.

"Szass Tam," she said, "who committed the order of Necromancy to the struggle, convinced Iphegor Nath to send the Burning Braziers, and armed the priests with their torch weapons."

"And who just recently saved the northern tharchs from a Rashemi invasion." "Yes."

"Curse it!" Aznar exploded. "I don't care what the whoreson's done. How can they make a hero of a lich?"

"We Thayans aren't a squeamish people," Shabella replied.

"You Red Wizards made sure of that when you recruited ores, zombies, and even demons to serve you. The commoners had little choice but to get used to them."

"Spare me your gloss on the history of the realm. Tell me who spreads these tidings through the alehouses and markets in a way that lionizes Szass Tam at the expense of everyone else who contributed to the victory."

"Agents employed by Dmitra Flass and Malark Springhill, most likely."

"If you know that, why haven't your cutthroats silenced them?"

"Because I don't really know, I simply infer. The taletellers are wily and my followers haven't yet identified them."

"Too busy skirmishing with the Shadowmasters?" he asked, referring to the one cartel of thieves that sought to supplant her and her organization.

"I have to address the problem," Shabella said. "I'm no use to you dead."

"Are you of any use currently? Perhaps your rivals wouldn't be so foolish as to give their business priority over mine."

"The local Shadowmasters are only one Chapter of a greater network based in Thesk. Would it truly suit Your Omnipotence to have foreigners controlling all thievery south of the First Escarpment?"

"It might at least suit me to see someone else officiating in front of Mask's high altar, so get out of here and do what needs doing."

She bowed and withdrew.

The unsatisfactory interview left Aznar feeling as restless and edgy as before, but perhaps he knew a way to lift his spirits. It had been a month since he'd visited Mari Agneh.

Though he didn't play with her as frequently—or, often, as elaborately—as in the first years of her captivity, she still amused him on occasion, which made her a rarity. Generally, the torment

of a particular victim eventually came to seem repetitive and stale, at which point he consigned that prisoner to his or her final agonies and moved on to the next.

He supposed it was Mari's austere good looks and defiant spirit that he still found piquant, combined with the fact that she was nearly the first person of significance he'd punished after assuming the mantle of a zulkir. In her way, she was a memento of his ascension.

Smiling now, he rose, took up his staff of luminous congealed flame, and exited the private chamber into a larger hall where bodyguards, clerks, and other functionaries awaited his pleasure. He waved them off and tramped on alone, through one magnificently appointed space after another. His passage was a like a ripple in a pond, agitating everyone. Sentries came to attention and saluted, while everybody else groveled in the manner appropriate to his station.

Such displays became less frequent once he made his way to corridors that, while no less handsomely decorated, were smaller and less well travelled. From there, a concealed door admitted him to his private prison.

Mari gave him a level stare as he entered her cell. "I'm going to kill you tonight," she said.

It surprised him a little. She hadn't made that particular threat in quite a while, not since they'd proved her helplessness time and again.

"By all means, try," he answered. "It always made our times together that much more entertaining, but first, take off your clothes, and keep your eyes on me as you do it. I want you to see me seeing you."

She obeyed, as of course she had to. His magic left her no choice.

"Now crawl to me on your belly and clean my shoes with your tongue."

She did that, too.

"Now hug the whipping post." He wouldn't need to tie or shackle her to keep her there. His spoken will sufficed even for that.

He laid down his staff, took down the whip from its hook on the wall, and cut her back into a tidy Crosshatch of bloody welts. Though it was the least of his accomplishments, he'd always taken a certain satisfaction in his skill with a lash. He fancied that if he hadn't been born with a talent for magic, he could have been one of Thay's more successful slavers. Perhaps it would have been a less stressful and demanding existence than the life of a zulkir.

Mari invariably struggled against the need to cry out. Perhaps what remained of her warrior's pride demanded it, whereas he found pleasure in overcoming that resistance, striking for as long as it took to get her squealing like an animal.

Perhaps the day's worries and frustrations had wearied him more than he knew, for tonight, it seemed to take an

unusually long time. He grew hot and sweaty, peeled off his crimson robe, and then the garments underneath, all the way down to his smallclothes.

Eventually Mari gave him a reaction, though not precisely the one he was expecting. Her shoulders began to shake, and she made a breathy, rhythmic sound. For a moment, he assumed she was sobbing then he realized that in reality, the noise was laughter.

He shook his head. He'd just been imagining she was the one plaything that would never break, and here was the first sign her sanity was crumbling at last. Life could be so drearily perverse.

"Turn around," he said, and she did. "Tell me what's so funny."

"The flogging doesn't hurt," she said, "not really, and you don't have any pockets anymore." She charged him.

Though she hadn't lifted her hand to him in quite some time, he was always watchful for it, always prepared, even in the deepest throes of lust, and it was no different now. "Stop!" he snapped.

She didn't stop. She raked her nails across his eye and punched him in the throat.

Half blind, half choking, he reeled back, then reflex took over. She was right, he'd divested himself of his protective talismans and the physical components required to cast many of his most powerful spells. He was the greatest master of Evocation in all Thay, though, and capable of creating many other effects by word and gesture alone. He croaked a word of power, jabbed out his hand, and bright globes of light burst in rapid succession from his fingertips. Swelling larger, they hurtled at Mari, each engulfing her in its turn, and with a deafening crackle, discharging the lightning that constituted its essence into her body.

Startled, hurt, Aznar had lashed out with one of the most potent attacks available to him, and he immediately realized the response was excessive. Such an abundance of magic he

might have used to kill a giant or wyvern. In all likelihood, there wouldn't even be anything left of her body and not much left of the furniture either.

When he caught his breath, wiped the tears from his stinging eye, and blinked the blurriness out of the world, he saw that he was half right. The spell had blasted the whipping post and bed frame into smoking scraps of kindling. The blankets, pillows, and mattress were on fire, but Mari stood where she'd stood before, seemingly unscathed.

Unscathed but not unchanged. She had four arms, not two, and her smooth ivory skin had darkened and roughened into purple scales. Her eyes glowed red, and the bottom half of her face had lengthened into a muzzle complete with fangs. It occurred to him that, except for her merely human stature and the fact that she was still manifestly female, she now resembled one of the demon guards stationed elsewhere in the palace. What did that mean? The order of Conjunction had supplied those demons. Was it possible Nevron had turned against him?

Mari gathered herself to spring, and Aznar realized he'd better put such speculations aside. He'd unravel the mystery of his captive's transformation in due course, but for now, what mattered was defending himself against her. It was obvious that in her altered condition, she no longer felt constrained to obey his commands.

Lightning hadn't harmed her, but maybe fire would. She lunged at him, and with a simple exertion of his will, he released the power bound in a tattooed glyph on his left forearm. It pained him like a bee sting, and Mari's entire body exploded into flame.

Plainly hurt, she staggered, and looking forward to watching her flounder, shriek, and burn, he stepped out of her blundering way.

She caught her balance and pivoted to threaten him anew. Two of her hands swiped at him with their talons. One grazed

his shoulder and drew blood.

The blaze enshrouding her hand didn't sear him. He'd long since forged unshakable alliances with Ere, acid, lightning, and cold, and Mari's claws scarcely broke his skin. Even so, he suffered a shock of weakness and dizziness. He swayed, and she nearly succeeded in catching him by the throat when she snatched for him again.

Retreating, he chanted while miming the making of a snowball and then the act of throwing it. Hurtling chunks of ice sprang into existence to batter Mari and knock her back a step, but they didn't put her down any more than the lightning and

fire had. In fact, her corona of punishing flame was guttering out faster than it was supposed to, revealing only superficial burns that were already starting to heal.

Damn it, he needed the items cached in his robe. They were the keys to unlocking his most devastating spells, and apparently nothing less would serve to neutralize his foe. Unfortunately, Mari stood between the garment and himself. He had to get past her somehow and likewise obtain the additional moment he'd need to retrieve the garment and pull out one of the appropriate talismans.

With a wave of his hand, he filled the air with what was, to him, merely a tinge of gray. To any other eyes, though, it would seem impenetrable darkness. Mari snarled and rushed him, plainly seeking to catch him before he could shift away from the spot where she'd seen him last.

He whispered a word of power and whisked himself through space. Now that he was outside the clot of shadow, it was opaque to him as well, though he could hear Mari flailing around inside.

He picked up his robe. It was on fire from collar to hem, but not yet so badly burned that it would disintegrate if he tried to put it on, and he lifted it to do so. His hands would find his spell triggers far more easily if his pockets were hanging in their accustomed places about his body.

Mari sprang from the cloud of darkness. Obviously, she'd figured out Aznar was no longer inside. If only she could have stayed fooled for one more heartbeat! Then everything would have been all right.

She snatched, caught the robe in her claws, and for an instant, the two of them pulled on it like children playing tug of war. Alas, she was the stronger, and when the burning, weakened cloth ripped in two, the piece in her talons was by far the larger. Laughing, she shredded it, and crystals, medallions, and

vials tumbled to the floor. Then she reached for Aznar, who, backing up until his shoulders banged against a wall, perceived that his paltry piece of the robe possessed at least a few pockets, though which ones, he couldn't tell. He stuck his hand in one at random and brought out a folded paper packet of powdered ruby.

It made him want to laugh, but there was scarcely time for that. He jabbered a rhyme and lashed the particles of red glittering dust through the air to explode into tiny sparks.

A cube with transparent crimson walls sprang into existence around the onrushing Mari. She slammed into the side of it and rebounded.

She'd charged so close to Aznar that when it popped into existence, the magical cage nearly trapped him as well by pinning him between itself and the wall behind him, but he sucked in his breath and managed to sidle free. Meanwhile, Mari attacked the enclosure with the frenzy of a rabid animal, repeatedly breaking and regrowing her talons.

"Strike at it all you like," Aznar Thrul panted. "It will hold. It will hold for days." Plenty of time for him to decide how best to chastise her and solve the puzzle of her metamorphosis.

For now, he required the aid of a healer to take away the sick feeling her claws had slashed into his flesh and strong drink to quiet his jangled nerves. He snapped his fingers to extinguish all the various fires then turned and exited the cell.



He was several paces down the corridor when four strong hands gripped him by the shoulders and forearms. He just had time to realize that, like many a true tanar'ri, Mari must also possess the ability to translate herself through space, then she yanked him close and plunged her fangs into his neck.

Tsagoth had tried to finagle a guard station close to Mari Agneh's hidden cell, so he'd have some hope of knowing when Aznar Thrul went to torture her. Unfortunately, though, he'd been unsuccessful, and when screams started echoing from that general direction, he had no idea whether they meant the former tharchion had struck at her captor at last or portended something else entirely.

He dissolved his body and reshaped it into the guise of a gigantic bat. Flight was often a faster, more reliable means of travel than blinking through space when he didn't know precisely where he was going. Wings beating, he raced through imposing chambers and hallways, over the heads of humans, ores, and other folk who were, in many cases, either running toward or away from the source of the noise.

He rounded another corner, and free of her prison at last, Mari Agneh came into view. Tsagoth felt a strange, unexpected stirring of pride at the marvel he'd created. Painted with fragrant human gore—Aznar Thrul's, no doubt—from mouth to navel, she was a pitiful runt compared to any true blood fiend, but in every other respect, he'd succeeded in transforming a feeble, insignificant mortal into an entity like himself.

She was confronting four warriors, a trio of spearmen, and one swordsman clad in the more ornate trappings and superior armor of an officer. Dissolving his bat guise, Tsagoth started the shift to his more customary form. Generally speaking, it was more useful for combat.

Before he could enter the fray, Mari sprang and raked the guts out of a spearman. In so doing, she perforce turned her back on some of his allies, and another warrior drove his

lance deep into her back. She scarcely seemed to notice. She whirled with such force that she jerked the weapon from his hands, grabbed hold of his head, and slammed him to the floor. Part of his face came away in her talons, and he didn't move thereafter.

The remaining spearman dropped his weapon and bolted. The officer, however, raised his sword to cut at Mari's head, and Tsagoth sensed potent enchantment seething in the gleaming gray blade. Perhaps Mari did too, for though she'd essentially ignored the spears, she now retreated and lifted a hand to ward herself.

The officer instantly spun his sword lower, extended the point, and exploded into a running attack. The move was all offense and no defense, arguably reckless in any situation and certainly so against an opponent as formidable as Mari, but it caught her by surprise, and the enchanted sword punched all the way through her torso.

Shouting, the warrior jerked his weapon free and raised it to cut. As it streaked down, she caught it in her two upper hands. The keen edge cut deep enough to sever one of her thumbs, but at least she kept it from cleaving her skull and brain.

She shifted closer to the swordsman and used her two remaining hands to gather him in. Then she plunged her fangs into his throat and sucked at the gushing wound.

All this, before Tsagoth could even complete his transformation and come to her aid. It made him feel even more gratified. He started toward her, and the mark on his brow gave him another twinge. He clawed it from existence, and his hide tickled as it immediately started to heal.

"I assume Aznar Thrul is dead," he said.

To his surprise, she failed to reply or acknowledge him in any fashion. She just kept guzzling blood. The prey in her grasp trembled, and his extremities twitched.

"Other people are coming," he said. "We can escape, but we should go now." She still didn't answer, so he laid his hand

on her shoulder.

Snarling, she turned and knocked his arm away, and when he gazed into her glaring crimson eyes, he saw nothing of reason or

comprehension there. It was as if she were a famished dog and he a stranger trying to drag her away from a side of beef.

As he'd warned her, humans were frail vessels to receive the power of a blood fiend, and her metamorphosis had driven her crazy. The only question was whether the insanity was permanent or temporary. If the latter, it might be worthwhile to try and see her safely through it.

Or not. When he heard shrill, excited voices and looked around, he saw a veritable phalanx of foes approaching, with men-at-arms around the edges of the formation and scarlet-robed wizards in the center.

It was possible that two blood fiends could defeat such a band, but Tsagoth saw little reason to make the experiment. His bemused interest in the odd hybrid entity he'd created and his casual notion that perhaps he ought to school her as his sire had mentored him lost their cogency when his own well-being was at issue. Now he only cared about extricating himself from this situation as expeditiously as possible.

The spear still embedded in her back, Mari helped him by whisking herself through space and ripping into the warriors in the front of the formation. The imminent threat riveted every foe's attention on her, and Tsagoth had no difficulty translating himself in a different direction without any of the warlocks casting a charm to hinder him.

He didn't shift as far as prudence alone might have dictated. At the last possible instant, he decided that, even if he was unwilling to stand with the savage, demented creature he'd created, he was curious to see how she would fare, so he contented himself with a doorway some distance away.

She fought well, slaughtering most of the warriors and two of the Red Wizards before one of the other mages showered her

with a downpour of conjured acid. Her scales smoking and blistering, she fell, and eyes seared away, face dissolving, struggled futilely

to rise. The warlock chanted and created a floating sword made of emerald light. The blade chopped and slashed repeatedly until she stopped moving.

Her destruction gave Tsagoth a slight twinge of melancholy, but only enough to season rather than diminish his satisfaction at the completion of what had proved an onerous chore. Glad that the system of wards protecting the fortress was better suited to keeping intruders out than holding would-be escapees in, he slipped through the net and into the night beyond.

## Chapter eleven

### 7 Kythorn, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Bareris crept down the trail, a narrow, crumbling path that ran along a sheer drop, and then the moonlight dimmed. Heart hammering, he crouched low and cast about until he discerned that it was only a cloud veiling Selune's face.

Flying with wings or without, as bats or insubstantial wraiths, the hunters prowled by night, and as often as not, Bareris found that required him to flee through the dark as well. At first he'd hoped he could simply find good hiding places and lie up until dawn, but close calls two nights in succession convinced him no refuge was safe enough. Perhaps, wearing the forms of wolves or rats, his foes could track him by scent. In any case, it seemed the better option was to keep moving and try to stay ahead of them.

Even with magic sharpening his vision, it was exhausting, dangerous work to negotiate mountain terrain in the dark. It made foraging more difficult as well. His throat seemed perpetually dry, and his belly, hollow.

Often, he wondered why he was even bothering with this forlorn, foredoomed attempt to escape. He'd promised to save Tammith, but truly, what were the chances? In all the lore he'd collected, from the soberest historical annals to the

most fanciful tales, there was nothing even to hint that a vampire could recover her humanity.

And what was the point of going on without her? How could he endure the knowledge that she blamed him for what had befallen her or the suspicion that she was right to do so? He'd failed her at least twice, hadn't he, once when he'd left her behind in Bezantur, and again when he'd bungled his attempt to rescue her.

If the future held nothing but misery, wouldn't it be better to put an end to the ordeal of running? A shout or two would draw the undead to him, then he could fight them as they arrived. With luck, he might have the satisfaction of destroying a couple before they slew him in his turn.

He felt the urge repeatedly, but as of yet he hadn't acted on it. Maybe, in defiance of all reason, a part of him hadn't abandoned hope that Tammith could still be saved, or perhaps the raw animal instinct to survive was stronger even than despair.

He skulked onward and came to a saddleback connecting one peak with the next, a wide, flat ridge that promised easier, faster trekking for a while. Hoping to find water as well, he quickened his stride, and then he felt a coldness, or perhaps simply an indefinable but sickening wrongness, above his head.

He threw himself onto his stomach, and hands outstretched to grab, rend, or both, the misty form of his attacker streaked over him. He rolled to his feet and drew his sword. The phantom lit on the rocky ground, or nearly so. Its form flickered and jumped so as to suspend its feet slightly above the earth one instant and sink them partly into it the next. Blighted by the entity's mere proximity, the little gnarled trees and bushes in

the immediate area dropped their leaves and withered.

Bareris took his first good look at the spirit then gasped. He never would have expected to encounter a creature uglier than Xingax, yet here it was. Indeed, despite their vague,

flowing inconstancy, its features somehow embodied the idea, the very essence, of hideousness in a way that even their twisted, hooknosed, pop-eyed asymmetry couldn't wholly explain. The mere sight of them ripped at something inside of him.

For an instant, he was afraid his heart would stop, his mind would shatter, and he'd collapse retching helplessly, or faint. But then he bellowed a war cry, and though the spirit remained as ghastly looking as before, its ugliness no longer had claws sunk in his spirit—a fact that wasn't likely to matter in the long run. Now that he could think more clearly, he recognized the undead as a banshee, an entity so powerful he had little hope of defeating it.

The banshee began to moan, and like the sight of its face, the noise pierced him to chill and stab something essential at his core. Steeling himself against the pain, he drew breath and sang, and the magic in his voice countered the lethal malignancy in the phantom's.

Still wailing, the banshee stretched out its long fingers and flew at him. He started chanting his charm of haste, waited until his foe was nearly upon him, then sidestepped. The undead hurtled past, and he cut at it. Though it passed through the banshee's wavering form, his sword encountered no tangible resistance, and he had no way of telling if he'd actually hurt the spirit. Since he was wielding an enchanted blade, it was possible but by no means a certainty.

His muscles jumped as the spell of quickness infused him. The banshee wheeled and rushed him anew, and his accelerated condition made it seem to fly more slowly. He bellowed, a blast of noise that might well have broken a tangible adversary's bones. Maybe it wounded the spirit as well, but as before, he could see no indication of it. The attack certainly didn't slow the banshee down, not even for a heartbeat.

Grimly aware his brigandine was no protection against the

entity's ghostly touch, he dodged and cut, sang and shrouded himself in a field of blur that might make it more difficult for the banshee to target him. He kept himself alive for a few more heartbeats.

Then the banshee sprang backward. For a moment, he imagined that he'd wounded it badly enough that it feared to continue fighting him. Then he felt the chilling scrutiny of a new presence, whose advent the banshee had evidently perceived a moment before he had.

It could easily be a fatal error to take his eyes off his original foe, but he needed to understand what was happening, so he risked a glance around. At first, he saw nothing, but then phosphorescence oozed through the air like a brush stroke flowing downward.

The streak of glow gradually assumed a manlike shape. Bareris gasped, because though it was like looking into a poorly made mirror in a dark room, he could tell the murky form was supposed to mimic his own.

Only for a moment, though. Then the thing rejected or was unable to sustain the resemblance. It softened until it was simply a luminous shadow with the hint of some form of armor in its shape and a length of sheen extending from its hand.

Bareris didn't know what the newcomer was, nor could he see a point to its brief impersonation of him, but he could only assume it was another of Xingax's hunters. Against all probability, he'd seemed to be holding his own against the banshee, and now his achievement didn't matter a jot. Fighting in concert, the two spirits were certainly capable of slaying him, and he felt a crazy impulse to laugh at his dismal luck and the ongoing ruination of all his hopes.

Instead, he faced the newcomer, the nearer of his foes, and came on guard. He'd at least make the vile creatures work for their kill.

The phantom came on guard in its turn, hesitated, then turned to face the banshee, to all appearances taking

Bareris for its ally and making plain its opposition to its fellow undead.

The banshee screamed, and Bareris sang to leech the poison from the sound. Then, even though it was apparently leery of the phantom, it raced forward to attack with its hands once more. Perhaps the will of its necromancer masters compelled it.

In the moments that followed, Bareris discerned that his new comrade, whatever else it might be, was a master swordsman, landing cunning strokes, retreating to avoid the banshee's snatching, clawing attacks, and scoring anew with stop cuts when the moaning ghost lunged after it. The newcomer likewise understood how best to exploit a numerical advantage and consistently maneuvered to insure that it and Bareris remained on opposite sides of their opponent.

The banshee pounced at the spectral swordsman. Bareris leaped after it and spun his blade through its head. The banshee frayed into tatters of glow, which then winked out of existence.

That left Bareris gasping for breath and peering at the remaining phantom through the empty space their foe had occupied a moment before. The entity shifted its sword to threaten him.

Wonderful, thought the bard. It didn't oppose the banshee because it wanted to help me. It just wanted to make sure it got to kill me itself. Probably I'm to be its supper in one fashion or another.

Yet the spirit didn't follow through and attack. It hesitated as though uncertain of what to do.

Doubtful that he could defeat the phantom in any case, Bareris decided to lower his sword. "Thank you for helping me," he said. "Unfortunately, I'm still in danger. Other enemies are

seeking me, and the banshee and I made more than enough noise to draw them here. If you see fit to stand with me a



second time, I'll be forever in your debt, or if you have a way we can hide or escape, that would be better still."

The spirit stared at him, then turned and started walking away. Bareris followed.

As the phantom strode, the sword melted from its hand, and its outline softened until it was just a luminous haze. Then that too faded away, though Bareris could still somehow sense it as an aching emptiness drifting on before him.

It led him into thick brush, and he had to shove and scramble to keep up. Then he took another step and found only empty air beneath his foot. He plummeted into darkness.

Samas Kul hadn't been sure he wanted to leave the banquet even temporarily. He'd eaten and drunk a considerable amount, enough to make even a fat man sluggish, enough to incline him to stay on his couch and sample all the courses and vintages still to come, no matter how enticing the reason to arise.

But he found the enclosed garden at the center of the mansion refreshing. The fountain gushed, the water glimmered in the moonlight, and the scent of jasmine filled the air. Best of all the breeze cooled his hot, sweaty face. It made him hopeful that he'd be able to perform without recourse to magic, and that was always a relief.

"Girls!" he called. "Where are you?"

The women in question were gorgeous twin courtesans provided by his hostess. People exerted themselves mightily to entertain a man who was both zulkir of Transmutation and Master of the Guild of Foreign Trade, but perhaps not mightily enough, because the twins didn't answer.

He wondered if they'd thought a game of hide and seek amongst the flowerbeds and arbors would arouse him. If so, they'd mistaken their man. He'd abandoned such callow amusements many years and many pounds ago. These days, he preferred passion without an excess of exertion.

"Girls!" he repeated, this time putting the snap of command

into his voice. "Show yourselves."

Still, no one replied, and abruptly he remembered that Druxus Rhym and Aznar Thrul were dead. Someone or something had caught them alone and murdered them. By all accounts, Thrul had even been preparing for coition, or a perverse alternative to it, when destruction overtook him.

But neither Rhym nor Thrul had anticipated trouble, nor had either had his talismans and spell triggers ready to hand. Samas invoked the power pent in a ring, and a protective aura, invisible as air but strong as steel, radiated from his body. He gave his left arm a shake and a wand of congealed quicksilver dropped from his voluminous sleeve into his pudgy fingers. He whispered a word of power and the darkness seemed to brighten. Now he could see as clearly as an owl.

That made it possible to spot the figure slipping through a doorway on the far side of the garden. Samas pointed the wand at the newcomer. A single flare of power should suffice to turn the wretch into a snail, after which it would be simplicity itself to capture him, change him back, and put him to the question.

But the man didn't move to attack, nor believing himself unobserved, did he continue skulking either. Instead, he dropped to his knees.

"Your Omnipotence," he said. "Thank you for coming. I realize I'm not as appealing a sight as the whores who delivered my invitation, but you can dally with them later if you're still so inclined. They understand they're to await your pleasure."

"How is it they answer to you? Duma Zan is paying them."

"You assumed that, and Lady Zan believes you invited the twins to attend the feast as your guests. In reality, I hired them to serve as my go-betweens."

"Who in the name of the Abyss are you?"

"Malark Springhill. We've never met, but perhaps you've heard of me."

"Dmitra Flass's man."

"Yes. May I rise?"

Samas hesitated. "I suppose so. What's this all about?"

"As you've surely heard by now, Szass Tam is convening the council of zulkirs. Tharchion Flass requests the honor of a private conversation with you, Yaphyll, and Lallara prior to the conclave."

Samas blinked. "You mean, with the three of us alone? And Szass Tam none the wiser?" "Yes."

"Everyone knows Dmitra is the lich's creature. Is he trying to test our loyalty?"

"If you believe so, Your Omnipotence, then may I suggest that you attend the meeting, then hurry to Szass Tam and tell him what was said."

Samas realized he'd been standing too long. His back was beginning to ache, and he felt a little short of breath. He cast about, spotted a marble bench, and lowered himself onto it. "What does Dmitra want to talk about?"

"I have no idea."

Oh, you know, Samas thought, it's just that the "First Princess of Thay" wants to tell us herself. "At least explain why you found it necessary to contact me in this melodramatic fashion."

Malark grinned. "If I may say so, Master, you don't know the half of it. To make it possible for me to reach all three of you zulkirs in time, my mistress conjured me a flying horse, and as I understand it, when an illusionist manufactures such a creature,

it isn't altogether real. Recognizing its ephemeral nature yet still riding it high above the ground makes a man feel rather bold.

"But to answer the question," the outlander continued, "you are watched. I should know. Some of the watchers report to me, but there may be others who report directly to Szass Tam, and if so, I'd rather they not tell him you and I have spoken."

"Now then: What answer should I deliver to Tharchion Flass?"

Frowning, Samas pondered the question. Like any sane person, he had no desire to run afoul of Szass Tam, yet as Malark himself had pointed out, he could always claim afterward that he attended the secret meeting as the lich's loyal ally, to make sure no one was plotting against him. Meanwhile, his truest fealty was to himself, and he hadn't prospered to the extent he had by ignoring any opportunity to find out what the other grandees of the realm were scheming or to accrue every conceivable advantage.

"Where and when does she want to see us?"

Bareris saw that he'd stepped into an overgrown but open stone well. It was like the shaft he'd climbed out of days before, only narrower. Falling, he dropped his sword and grabbed at the curved wall beside him but failed to find a handhold.

Below him, metal rang, and an instant later he slammed down on a hard, uneven surface. Once the shock of the impact passed, and it was clear the short drop had merely bruised him, he discerned that he and his weapon had landed on a portion of a staircase spiraling into the depths. The disquieting vacancy that was his phantom guide hovered farther down.

He wondered if the spirit had just attempted to lure him into a fatal fall. If so, it would be crazy to continue following it.

But if it wanted him dead, it could have just attacked him with its sword, or let the banshee kill him. It seemed more likely that it had simply expected him to spot the shaft before blundering over the edge.

In any case, Bareris might have nowhere to go but down. By now, more of Xingax's hunters could easily have reached the ridge.

He rose, picked up his sword, and grumbled, "Warn me next time." The entity drifted onward, and he stalked after it.

Before long they came to the first of the vaults opening onto

the well. The chamber was a sort of crypt, with supine, somewhat withered-looking figures of pale stone, their arms crossed, laid out in rows on the floor. They could have been sculptures, but Bareris' intuition told him they were corpses, coated with rock or ceramic or somehow petrified entirely. That suggested the ancients hadn't excavated this place to serve as a village or fortress either. It was a warren of tombs. The dead bodies brought the phantom wavering in and out of visibility as it took on the semblance of first one and then another, but it didn't cling to any of them for long.

The crypts grew larger as Bareris and his guide descended. Stone sarcophagi, in some cases carved with the images of the dead, hid their occupants from view. Faded, flaking murals on the walls proclaimed their achievements and their adoration of their gods. The phantom borrowed faces from some of the carved and painted images as well, only to relinquish them just as quickly.

The bottom of the well was in view when the phantom led Bareris off the steps and into one of the vaults. A moment later, a gray, plump, segmented creature half as long as the bard was tall crawled from behind a bier. It raised its hairless, eyeless, but nonetheless manlike head and swiveled it in his direction.

Bareris's body clenched into rigidity, and pain burned through his limbs. He struggled to fill his lungs then chanted a charm of vitality.

The agony and near-paralysis faded. Intending to dispatch the sluglike creature before it could afflict him a second time, he lifted his sword and took an initial stride, but the spirit stepped to block the way, and a shadow blade extended from its murky hand.

Meanwhile, the crawling thing turned, retreated deeper into the crypt, and called out in a language Bareris had never heard before.

He hesitated. Despite the unpleasantness he'd suffered a moment before, it now seemed as if the worm-creature

wanted to talk, not fight, and he certainly didn't want to battle it and the wraith at the same time if it wasn't necessary.

He sang to grant himself the gift of tongues then called, "I couldn't understand you before, but I will now."

"I said to keep your distance," the eyeless being replied. "I don't want to turn you to stone—not unless you mean me harm—but I can't stop the force emanating from my body any more than you can stop the flow of blood through your veins."

"I didn't come to hurt you," Bareris said. "I asked your . . . companion here to take me somewhere safe because other undead creatures are hunting me. I should warn you, they might track me into the well. They've sniffed out some of my other hiding places."

"I doubt they'll find this one," the creature said. "Those who built it had a fear of necromancers tampering with their remains, so they took precautions to prevent such indignities. They laid their dead to rest in a secret place far from their habitations and also arranged for me to dwell here, to petrify the corpses and make them impossible to reanimate. Most importantly from your perspective, they laid down wards to keep a wizard's undead servants from locating the tombs."

Bareris felt the tension flow out of him, leaving a profound weariness in its place. "That's good to hear."

"Sit. Mirror and I can offer no other comforts fit for a mortal man, but you can at least rest."

The bard flopped down with his back against a wall. "Mirror is an apt name for your friend, I suppose. Mine is Bareris Anskuld."

"I'm Quickstrike. A gravecrawler, as you can see."

Bareris shook his head. "I have to take your word for it. I've never met or even heard of a creature like you before."

"Truly? I wonder if the rest of my kind have vanished from the world." Quickstrike sounded more intrigued than dismayed

by the possibility. "Men also called us ancestor worms."

"Interesting," Bareris said, and it was, a little. Despite the despair that had consumed him of late, he couldn't help feeling somewhat curious about his new companions. Curiosity was a fundamental aspect of the character of any bard. "Are gravecrawlers undead?"

"Of a sort, but not the sort that was ever human or preys on humans, not as long as they behave themselves."

"I assure you, I intend to. And Mirror is a ghost? "

"Ofa particularly brave and accomplished warrior, I believe. As you will have guessed, Mirror is simply the nickname I gave him, based on his habit of filching an appearance. He doesn't remember his true name or face any longer, or much of anything really."

"Why not?"

Quickstrike's body rippled from head to tail in a manner that suggested a man stretching. "He fell victim to the power that destroyed his entire people. It's a sad story, but one I can relate if you want to hear."

Bareris had the feeling that, after centuries with only the mute, nearly mindless Mirror for company, Quickstrike enjoyed having someone to talk to, while for his part, he had nothing better to do than listen.

"Please do. I've spent much of my life collecting tales and songs."

"Well, then. In its time, not so very long after the fall of Netheril, a splendid kingdom ruled these mountains. It owed much of its greatness to a single man, Fastrin the Delver, a wizard as clever and powerful as any who ever lived.

"For much of his life, Fastrin worked wonders to benefit his people and gave sage counsel to their lords. Eventually, however, he withdrew from the world, and those few who saw him thereafter said he was troubled but couldn't or wouldn't explain why, which kept anyone from realizing just how dire the situation was. Fastrin wasn't just morose, he

was going mad.

"One sunny summer morning," Quickstrike continued, "he emerged from his seclusion and started methodically slaughtering people, laying waste to one community after another, but he wasn't content with simply ending the lives of his victims. His magic mangled their minds and souls. In many cases, it may have obliterated their spirits entirely. Even when it didn't, it stripped them of memory and reason."

"Like Mirror," Bareris said.

"Yes. He was one of many who tried to stand against Fastrin. Sadly, their valor accomplished nothing. I suppose a few people must have escaped by taking flight, but at the end of the wizard's rampage, the kingdom he'd done so much to build no longer existed. He then turned that same lethal, psyche-rending power on himself."

"What was it all about? Even lunatics have reasons, though they may not make sense to the rest of us. Did anyone try to parley with him?"

"Yes," said the ancestor worm. "Fastrin said he'd been robbed, and since he was unable to identify the thief, everyone must die. It was the only way to be safe."

Bareris shook his head. "I don't understand."

"No one did, and Fastrin refused to elaborate."

"May I ask how you learned all this?"

"When I was buried in this place? Well, even Fastrin couldn't kill an entire realm in a day, or a tenday, and as the massacre continued, folk sought my counsel. Ancestor worms were accounted wise, you see. When I ate the flesh of the dead, before I grew beyond the need of such provender, I absorbed their wisdom. Alas, nothing I'd ever learned offered any remedy to the disaster."

"Later, when people stopped coming here, I ventured forth to discover if anyone remained alive. I didn't find any humans, but by good fortune, I encountered a hunting party of ores, who then attacked me."



Bareris smiled crookedly. " 'Goodfortune, 'you say."

"Very much so, because they didn't all turn to stone. One simply bled out after I pierced it with my fangs, and when I ate some of it, it turned out that it had witnessed Fastrin's suicide from a safe distance. Either the wizard didn't notice, or since the ore hadn't been a subject of the kingdom, it didn't figure in his delusions and he saw no reason to attack it. Either way, at least I now knew what had happened, grim though it was, so I returned home.

"Now tell me your tale."

Bareris winced. For a moment, Quickstrike's story had distracted him from his sorrows, and he had no desire to return to them. "It's not worth telling."

"When it involves you fleeing the undead? Don't be ridiculous."

Bareris reflected that the gravecrawler was, in fact, his host, so he owed the creature some accounting of himself. "As you wish. I don't know how much you know about the kingdoms of men as they exist today. I hail from a realm called Thay..."

He tried to relate the tale as tersely as possible, without any of the embellishments he would have employed if he'd been enjoying himself or striving to tease applause and coins from an audience. Still, it took a while. Long enough to dry his throat.

He drank the last swig from one of his water bottles. "And that's it," he concluded. "I warned you it wasn't much of a story. A good one has a shape to it. Even if it makes you feel sadness or pity, it somehow lifts you up as well, but mine's just bungling, futility, and horror."

Quickstrike cocked his eyeless head. "You speak as if the story's over."

"It is. It doesn't matter if I make it out of these mountains and live another hundred years. I've already lost everything I cherished and the only fight worth fighting."

"My existence and mind are different from yours. I don't love, and long solitude that no human could endure suits

me. All my knowledge of mortal thoughts and feelings is secondhand, and it's possible that on the deepest level, I cannot understand, but I think you still have a path to walk, and Mirror will help you on your way."

"What do you mean?"

"He wanders, and despite the damage to his mind, he knows these peaks and valleys, these Sunrise Mountains, as your people name them. He can keep you hidden from your pursuers while he guides you back to your own country."

"Does he want to? Why?"

"Because he's empty. He needs something to reflect, to fill and define him, and you, the first live man we've seen since he manifested in these vaults centuries ago, can do so in a way that lifeless paintings and carvings and I, an undead, inhuman creature, cannot."

"You make it sound as if he'll drain sustenance from me like a leech."

"No more than your reflection in any other glass." Bareris still didn't like the sound of it. "Won't you miss him?" "No. I wish him well, but I told you, my needs and feelings aren't like yours."

Bareris decided it wasn't worth further argument. The truth was, if he meant to go on living, he did need help, besides which,

if Mirror insisted on accompanying him, he probably couldn't stop him anyway. But if they were to be companions, he ought to stop talking about the ghost as if he weren't there, even though he barely was.

He cast about and found a streak of blur hanging in the air. "Thank you," he said. "I'm grateful for your aid." As he'd expected, Mirror made no reply.

## Chapter twelve

9-11 Kythorn, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Yaphyll looked around the shabby, cluttered parlor, a room in a nondescript house that Dmitra Flass probably owned under another name. It was easy to imagine a goodwife

shooing her children out of the chamber so she could dust the cheap ceramic knickknacks and scrub the floor, or her husband drinking ale and swapping ribald jokes with his cronies from the coopers' guild. Today, however, the occupants were rather more august.

Voluptuous by Mulan standards, the "First Princess of Thay" was as annoyingly ravishing as ever. Samas Kul was as obese, ruddy-faced, sweaty, and ostentatiously dressed, while, as was so often the case, Lallara looked vexed and ready to vent her spleen on the first person who gave her an excuse.

Though Yaphyll remained dubious that attending Dmitra's secret meeting was actually a wise idea, she found it marginally reassuring that the tharchion seemed as ill at ease as everyone else. Oh, she masked it well, but every Red Wizard of Divination

mastered the art of reading faces and body language, and Yaphyll could tell nonetheless. Dmitra likely would have manifested a different sort of nervous tension had she been engaged in a plot to harm or undermine her superiors.

On the other hand, Dmitra was a Red Wizard of Illusion, so how could anyone be certain whether to trust appearances where she was concerned?

At least, now that Samas had finally waddled in and collapsed onto a couch substantial enough to support his bulk, Dmitra appeared ready to commence.

"Masters," she said, "thank you for indulging me. Ordinarily, I wouldn't presume to take the lead in a meeting with my superiors, but since—"

"Since you're the only one who knows what in the name of the Dark Sun we're here to talk about," Lallara snapped, "it only makes sense. We understand, and you have our permission to get on with it."

"Thank you, Your Omnipotence. I'm concerned about the welfare of the realm, worried and suspicious because I have information you lack and have thus been able to draw

inferences you haven't."

"What are they?" Samas asked, fanning his face with a plump, tattooed hand.

"That Szass Tam murdered both Druxus Rhym and Aznar Thrul, that he betrayed a Thayan army to its foes, and that he disseminated a false report of a Rashemi invasion."

Lallara laughed. "This is ludicrous."

"If we consider the evidence, Your Omnipotence, perhaps I can persuade you otherwise. May we start with the assassination of Druxus Rhym?"

"By all means," Samas said. "It seems like the quickest way to lay your suspicions to rest. As I understand it, the murderer used evocation magic to make the kill."

"As could any of us," Dmitra replied. "We all tend to rely on spells deriving from our particular specialties, but in fact, each of us possesses a more comprehensive knowledge of magic. Certainly that's true of Szass Tarn, universally recognized as the most accomplished wizard in the land. My conjecture is that he used the spells he did precisely to throw suspicion on the order of Evocation, Aznar Thrul being one of his enemies."

"But Druxus wasn't," Yaphyll said. "He was Szass Tarn's ally, no less than any of us. Szass had no motive to kill him."

"He had one," Dmitra replied, "to which we'll return again: to create a climate of fear. I'll grant you, that by itself isn't sufficient motive to turn on a supporter, and as yet I can't resolve the discrepancy, but I can demonstrate that Szass Tarn hasn't sought the identity of the murderer with the zeal one would expect of a compatriot with nothing to hide."

"How so?" Lallara asked.

"I have the most competent spy network in the realm, and Szass Tam knows it. Over the years, it's served him well, yet he virtually forbade me to use my agents to seek the identity of the assassin. He said that you, Mistress Yaphyll, would attend to it."

Yaphyll blinked. "I tried for a while. In fact, Szass and I tried

together. Then when our divinations failed to reveal anything, he suggested I turn my attention to other concerns and said he would continue to hunt for the killer by other means. I assumed he was referring to your spies."

"None of that proves anything," Samas said.

He looked about, spotted the drink and viands laid out on a table by the wall, and made a mystic gesture in their direction. A bottle floated into the air and poured red wine into a goblet. A knife smeared honey on a sweet roll.

"No," said Lallara, eyes narrowed, "it doesn't, but I'll concede it's curious, and I also agree that Szass Tam is one of the few people who might have been able to slip into Druxus's bedchamber

undetected or sneak an agent in. He's also one of the few capable of thwarting Yaphyll's divinations, especially if he was actually present to undermine the efficacy of the rituals in some subtle fashion."

"There's also this," Dmitra said. "Szass Tam made sure that you, Master Kul, would be elected Druxus Rhym's successor. I don't doubt you were a suitable candidate for the post, but still, why was he so concerned that it be you in particular? Could it have been partly because he knew you felt no great fondness for Rhym, and—forgive me for presuming to comment on your character—weren't the kind of man who would exert himself unduly to investigate a murder that worked to his benefit, even if the crime did constitute an affront against the order of Transmutation?"

Lallara snorted. "You have that right. All this hog cares about is stuffing his coffers and stuffing his mouth."

Samas glared at her. "I understand I'm your junior and that you have a shrewish disposition. Still, have a care how you speak to me."

"Masters, please," Dmitra said. "I beg you not to quarrel among yourselves. If my suspicions are correct, that's the last thing you should do."

"Is there more to say about Druxus's death?" Yaphyll asked.

"Unfortunately no," Dmitra replied, "so let's consider the battle in the Gorge of Gauros." She smiled. "I myself have a spy's nose for truth and falsehood, and from the start, something about the tale that came down from the north smelled wrong. Since Szass Tam figured prominently in the story, and he'd just piqued my curiosity by terminating my inquiries into Druxus Rhym's murder, I decided to look into the matter of the 'Rashemi invasion' instead.

"I found out there wasn't any. The barbarians weren't on their way south to attack us. Tharchions Kren and Odesseiron were

marching north to invade Rashemen, but after a near-disastrous battle forced them to abandon their ambitions, Szass Tam supported them when, to avert the anger of the rest of you zulkirs, they claimed the Rashemi were the aggressors."

"And you think," Lallara said, "it was because, coming so soon after Druxus's murder, that story added to the 'climate of fear' Szass Tam hoped to create."

"Yes," Dmitra said, "but if we look deeper, we'll discern even more. Allow me to describe the battle in detail." She did so with the concise clarity of a woman who, though she wore the crimson robes of a wizard, also possessed the requisite skills to command troops in the field. "Now several questions suggest themselves: How did the Rashemi know our legions were coming and where best to intercept them? How were the witches able to counter the Thayan wizardry holding the river in check so easily? How was it that Szass Tam discerned the army's peril from wherever he was and translated himself onto the scene just in time to avert calamity?"

Yaphyll chuckled. "Perhaps the greatest mage in Thay perceives all manner of signs and portents invisible to lesser beings like ourselves." At the moment, she didn't actually feel like jesting, but they all had their masks to wear, and hers was the cute lass with the light heart and irrepressible sense of humor. Even after she rose through high in the

hierarchy of her order, and any person of sense should have realized she possessed a ruthless heart and adamant will, it had caused foes and rivals to underestimate her. "But you're positing that his spies reported Kren and Odesseiron's plans before they ever marched and he then somehow conveyed critical military and arcane intelligence to the Rashemi, providing them with the means to smash the Thayan host, and finally, he rushed to the tharchions' rescue."

"Exactly," Dmitra said, "because it isn't enough to frighten everyone. He also wants to convince the nobles, legions, and commons that he's the one champion who can end our woes. Obviously, the recent trouble in Pyarados must have seemed like a boon from the gods. It's given him the chance to play the savior not just once but twice."

Samas swallowed the food in his mouth, and then, his full lips glazed with honey, asked, "Why would he suddenly care so much about the opinion of his inferiors?"

"With your permission, Your Omnipotence," Dmitra replied, "before we ponder that, perhaps it would be well to finish our review of recent events, to consider the death of Aznar Thrul."

Yaphyll grinned. "Must we? I'd hoped that was one matter we understood already. In the wake of Druxus's murder, Nevron loaned the other members of his faction demons bodyguards. One of the spirits slipped its tether and surprised Thrul when he was amusing himself with a female slave and ill prepared to defend himself. It tore them apart and afterward some of Thrul's followers killed it in its turn." .

"I suspect," Dmitra said, "the truth is more complex. From what my spies have managed to determine, it's not clear that the thrall's body has been recovered. We do know the creature that ran amok liked to kill by biting its victims in the throat and that some people remember it as originally being huge and male, whereas the entity the conjurors ultimately slew possessed the same four arms, scales, and

what have you, but was no taller than a human being and female.

"I believe the original creature was a blood drinker and transformed the slave into an entity like itself so she would kill Aznar Thrul. In other words, it wasn't a demon in the truest sense, but rather some exotic form of vampire."

"Which suggests," Lallara said, "that it wasn't really a conjuror who summoned and bound it but rather a necromancer like Szass Tam, who then slipped it into Thrul's palace amid a troupe of Nevron's demons."

Samas nodded, his multiple chins wobbling. "Figuring that the murder of a second zulkir would spread that much more terror throughout the land. I understand, but we should also recognize that at least this death benefits us as well. Thrul was our enemy. With him gone, our faction controls the council, at least until the conjurors elect a new leader, and if he turns out to be sympathetic to our views, we can run things as we like for the foreseeable future."

"That assumes," Dmitra answered, "your faction remains intact, that you still view yourselves and Szass Tam as sharing common interests."

"Why wouldn't we?" Samas asked.

"I see it," Yaphyll said, and though she still wasn't certain Dmitra was correct, the mere possibility made her feel queasy. "Supposedly, Thay is in jeopardy. The Rashemi threaten from the north and undead marauders from the east. An unknown foe strikes down the zulkirs one by one. Fortunately, a hero has demonstrated the will and capacity to save the realm—if given a free hand to do so. You think that's the object of convening the council, don't you, Tharchion? Szass Tam is going to ask us to elect him supreme ruler of Thay."

Lallara grinned a sardonic grin. "Only temporarily, no doubt. Just until the crisis is resolved."

"He can't believe we would ever consent to such a thing!" Samas cried. "It's one thing to acknowledge him as the



eldest and most accomplished of the zulkirs and the leader of our faction— first among equals, so to speak—but none of us fought all the way up to the loftiest rank in the land just to enthrone an overlord to command us as his vassals."

"I understand that," Dmitra said, "but I still felt it incumbent on me to warn you. Imagine if I hadn't. You've pledged your loyalty to Szass Tam, and knowing just how shrewd and powerful he is, you have no inclination to cross him. You take your seat in

council worried over threats to the realm and your own personal safety as well. It appears the lich is the only person who's enjoyed any success confronting any of the various problems. Certainly that's what the populace at large believes.

"Now then: In the situation I've described, when Szass Tam requests his regency, or however he intends to put it, who among you, without knowing how the others feel, is bold enough to be the first to denounce the proposal?"

Yaphyll wished she could claim that she would find the courage, but she wondered if it was so. No zulkir could show weakness by confessing to fear of anyone or anything. But the truth was, even though he'd supported her in all her endeavors, she was afraid of Szass Tam, and she could tell that Samas and even Lallara, with her bitter, thorny nature, felt the same.

Lallara laughed. "Hear the silence! It appears, Tharchion, that none of us would dare."

"That means four votes in favor," Dmitra said, "and with Evocation's seat empty, at best three against. The measure passes. To forestall that, I hope the three of you will pledge here and now to stand firm against it."

"No," said Samas Kul, "or at least, not yet."

Dmitra inclined her head. "May I ask what more you require to persuade you, Master?"

"Yes, illusionist," the fat man replied, "you may. You've whistled up a host of phantoms to affright us, but I'd be

more inclined to cower if I understood why you of all people would want to warn us. You're one of Szass Tarn's favorites. If he crowned himself king, you'd benefit."

"You forget," Yaphyll said, "Tharchion Flass has sworn to serve all of us zulkirs, and I'm sure that, like all of us, she's concerned first and foremost with the welfare of the realm."

Lallara shot her a poisonous glance. "Your little drolleries are growing even more tiresome than usual." She shifted her glare

to Dmitra. "The hog raises a valid point. If this is all a charade, it's hard to imagine what you could possibly be trying to achieve, but still: Why should we trust you?"

"Because Szass Tam no longer does," Dmitra replied. "In times past, he would have confided in me. Involved me in any scheme to which I might prove useful, even the assassination of a fellow zulkir, yet now, suddenly, he dissembles with me and only asks me to advance his schemes in a limited fashion, even though I've given him no reason to question my loyalty.

"Why? I can't imagine, any more than I know what he gained by murdering Druxus Rhym, or why, after contenting himself with being senior zulkir for so long, he's decided to strike for even greater authority. Not understanding alarms me.

"What I do know is that life in Thay as it's currently governed has been good to me. I have a nasty suspicion that, for whatever reason, I wouldn't find existence so congenial under Szass Tarn's new regime."

She smiled. "So I'm trying to keep things as they are, and hope to manage to do so with minimal risk to myself. I've taken pains to keep Szass Tam from learning of this meeting, and if none of you tattles that I sought to rally you against him, I shouldn't suffer for it."

Lallara grunted. "What you say makes a certain amount of sense, Tharchion, which isn't to imply I embrace it as complete and utter truth. And perhaps your motives don't matter so very much, because Samas was right about one

thing: He, Yaphyll, and I are all averse to installing the lich in a new office higher than our own. It's clear from our manner even if we haven't declared it outright, so I say, yes, let's seal a secret pact of resistance, just in case."

Yaphyll nodded. "Agreed. No kingship or regency for anyone, ever, under any circumstances." Unless, of course, she could somehow, someday win such a prize for herself.

Samas Kul heaved a sigh. "I agree, too, I suppose."

It was as eloquent an oration as Szass Tam had ever given. He enumerated the dire menaces facing Thay in general and the zulkirs personally. He reminded the other mage lords of his accomplishments, recent and otherwise, and pointed out how divided leadership could prevent even the greatest realm in Faeriin from achieving its goals or coping in an emergency. The failed military endeavors of recent decades were obvious examples.

He also promised he'd step down as soon as he eliminated the threats to the common weal. He omitted, however, any mention of the hideous punishments he'd meted out to folk who had, at one time or another, balked or angered the oldest and most powerful wizard in the land. He was certain the other zulkirs recalled those without his needing to allude to them.

Yet when he saw the glances that passed among Yaphyll, Lallara, and Samas Kul, he realized that somehow the other members of his faction had already known what he was going to propose. Known, palavered in secret, and resolved to oppose him as staunchly as the remaining zulkirs, and that was staunchly indeed. The other three were his long-time enemies: Nevron with his perpetual sneer and the brimstone stink of his demon servitors clinging to his person; Lauzoril, deceptively bland and clerkish; and Mythrellan, who affected to despise everyone else on the council, who changed her face as often as other great noblewomen changed their gowns, frequently to something with an element of the bizarre but always exquisite

nonetheless. Today her eyes were gold and her skin sky blue. A haze of unformed illusion ready for the shaping made her image soft and blurry.

Even though he recognized early on that he was almost certainly speaking in vain, Szass Tam carried on to the end then called for a vote. It seemed possible that, now that the moment

for support or defiance had arrived, his supposed allies might lose their nerve.

Alas, they remained resolute. Only Szass raised his ham in support of the proposal he himself had introduced. Nevroi leered to see his foe so humiliated. Even prim Lauzoril managed a smirk.

Though he hadn't expected to find Yaphyll, Samas, and Lallara united against him, Szass had thought himself prepared for the possibility that his ploy would fail. Still, the mockery inspired an unexpected paroxysm of rage. He yearned to lash out at every adversary, old and newly revealed, seated around the gleaming red maple table.

He didn't, of course. Attacking six other zulkirs at once might well prove suicidal, even for a mage more powerful than any one of them. Instead, making sure his mask of affability didn't slip, he inclined his head in seeming acceptance.

"So be it," he said. "We'll continue on as we always have, deciding all matters by consensus. Be assured, I don't resent it that you rejected my plan, prudent though I believe it was, and I'll keep working diligently to solve the problems that plague us."

At the same time, simply by thinking, he sent a signal. He'd prepared the magic beforehand, with sufficient concern for subtlety to ensure that even the extraordinarily perceptive Yaphyll wouldn't notice it thrilling through the aether.

After that, everyone blathered on for a while longer, and though he felt a seething impatience to depart, he supposed that really it was fine. His minions needed time to do their

work.

As soon as the meeting broke up, he spurned Samas, Yaphyll, and Lallara with their slinking excuses and attempts at reconciliation and translated himself back to his study in the citadel of the order of Necromancy. It took the warlock waiting there an instant to notice his arrival, and then the fellow flung himself to

his knees. Tsagoth knelt as well, albeit with a glower. Apparently the blood fiend had expected his master to liberate him once he accomplished the death of Aznar Thrul, but as demonstrated by that success, he was too useful an agent to relinquish when so many challenging tasks remained.

"Get up," Szass Tam said. "Tell me what's happening."

"Yes, Master," said the younger necromancer, rising. Szass had the conceit that if he peered deep into his subordinate's eyes, he could glimpse an indefinable wrongness there, a hint of the psychic shackles binding the live wizard to silence and obedience, but perhaps it was only his imagination. "Our agents are spreading the tidings that, in their arrogance, folly, and ingratitude, the other zulkirs denied you the authority you need to preserve the realm."

"With the proper enchantments in play to make the news seem as infuriating as possible."

"Yes, Master, just as you directed."

"Good." Szass Tam turned to Tsagoth. "You know what to do from here. Go tell your partners."

Nular Tabar glanced back at the shuttered three-story brick house behind him. It wasn't the primary stronghold of the order of Conjunction in Eltabbar. That imposing citadel was on the other side of town, but despite a lack of banners, overt supernatural manifestations, and the like, everyone in the neighborhood knew this was some sort of Chapter house. People saw the mages and their retainers passing in and out. They weren't coming out now. They were leaving the protection of the property to Nular and the dozen

legionnaires in his patrol, and at that point, it remained to be seen just how hard the job would be. Though in normal times, no commoner dared

annoy Red Wizards, scores of people had gathered to glare, mill about, and shout slogans and insults at the house. Apparently, they all wanted Szass Tam for their king, were angry they weren't going to get him, and had decided to hold Nevron, notoriously one of the lich's enemies, responsible for their disappointment. The zulkir of Conjunction wasn't here to bear the brunt of their anger, but a structure belonging to his order was.

Nular had formed his patrol into a line to block the approach to the house as best they could. The problem was that a dozen soldiers couldn't form a very long line without standing so far apart as to give up the ability to protect one another's flanks. He wasn't about to order that, which meant that a fool hell-bent on getting at the building could dart around the end of the formation.

Sure enough, a wiry, dark-haired youth with a sack clutched under his arm lunged at the gap on the southern end. The warrior last in line pivoted and swung his cudgel but was too slow. The lad sprinted on unabashed.

"Hold your positions!" Nular shouted then raced after the youth himself.

The adolescent was quick, but so was he, and he possessed the advantage of long Mulan legs. He caught up, lifted his baton to bash the lad over the head, then thought how the brutal sight might further enflame the mob. He dropped the cudgel to dangle from the strap around his wrist and grabbed the youth with his empty hands instead.

The boy dropped the bag to wrestle and turned out to have some notion of what he was doing. He tried to jam his knee into Nular's groin, and the guard twisted and caught the attack on his thigh. Next came grubby fingers gouging for his eyes. He protected them by ducking his head then butted the adolescent in the face. The lad faltered, and

Nular threw him down on his back. That seemed to knock the fight out of him.

Clad in rags, the lad was plainly a pauper. The stained sack gave off a fecal stink. Most likely he'd meant to use the contents to deface the Red Wizards' door.

"Stay down," Nular panted, "or I swear, next time I'll use my sword on you."

The boy glowered but didn't move.

"What in the name of the Kossuth's fire is the matter with you?" Nular continued. "Would you throw away your life on an idiot prank? You know the wizards punish disrespect."

"Szass Tam has to be regent!" the youth replied.

"Why do you care? What difference do you think it will make to the likes of you?"

And as long as Nular was posing questions, how had the boy and his fellows learned the outcome of the zulkirs' deliberations so quickly? As often as not, lesser folk never even heard the council had met, let alone what it decided.

It was a mystery, but someone shrewder than Nular would have to puzzle it out. His job was simply to keep order in one section of Elrabbar's labyrinthine streets.

"Get up," he said, "and pick up your bag of filth. Now go home! If you're still here in forty breaths, or if I catch you out of doors again tonight, I'll gut you." He prodded the youth with the tip of his club to start him moving.

Once he'd herded the lad to the other side of the line, Nular scrutinized all the others like him. Feeding off one another's outrage, they were growing more agitated by the moment. It was only a matter of time before the stones started flying.

He was no orator, but he had to say something to try and calm them. He was still trying to frame the words in his mind when some of them cried out, and they all flinched back.

He turned to see what had alarmed them. Standing behind the line was a towering four-armed creature with dark scales and gleaming scarlet eyes.

Nular felt a strange blend of fear and relief, the former

because every sane person was leery of demons, and the latter because it was plain the conjurors in the house had sent the creature to help him.

He gazed up at its wolfish face. "Do you understand me?" he asked.

The entity chuckled. "Yes."

"Good. That will make things easier. The sight of you has frightened the mob. We need to keep them intimidated. With luck, scare them into going elsewhere."

"No, warrior. We need to slaughter them. Don't worry, fighting in concert, we'll manage easily."

Nular frowned. "Maybe we would, but I'm hoping it won't be necessary."

"It already is. The rabble's impudence is an affront to my masters and must be punished accordingly."

"Do your masters understand that the unrest isn't just happening here? The 'rabble' have taken to the streets across the city. If we kill people, the violence could spread and spread. We could end up with a riot far worse than those we've endured already."

The demon shrugged. "That's nothing to me. My masters command, and I obey. Are you not obliged to obey Red Wizards, also?"

Nular hesitated. "Yes, but you're not one. If we're going to do this, I at least need to hear the order from one of the conjurors." He started to walk around the creature toward the house.

The spirit shifted so as to remain directly in front of him.

"That isn't necessary," it said, and its crimson eyes flared brighter.

Nular rocked backward as though something had struck him a blow. He felt bewildered, as if he'd just awakened from a dream so vivid that he couldn't be certain what was real.

Then he caught his balance, and his confusion passed. Or partly so. "What. . . what were we saying?" he asked.

"Thar we're going to kill the rebels."



"Yes." That sounded right, or at least familiar. "Swords!"

A couple of his men—the clever ones, who might rise from the ranks one day—eyed him dubiously, but they were all well trained and exchanged their truncheons for their blades without protest. He did the same.

"Now forward!" Nular shouted. "Keep the line and cut the bastards down."

The mob might have had the stomach for a fight with a dozen legionnaires, but legionnaires and an ogre-sized demon were a more daunting prospect. They screamed and tried to run, but their numbers were such that they got in each other's way. The ones closest to their attackers couldn't evade the soldiers' swords and the creature's fangs and talons, and thus they had no choice but to turn again and fight.

It was all right though. The soldiers' training, armor, and superior weapons aided them, of course, but it was the demon's ferocity that truly rendered the mob's numerical advantage inconsequential. Striking quickly as a cat, ripping men to pieces with every blow, the spirit butchered more foes than all its human allies put together, until a rioter charged it from behind and buried an axe in its back. Whereupon the demon screamed, collapsed to its knees, then melted away to nothing at all. Nular could scarcely believe that a creature, which had seemed the very embodiment of inhuman might, could perish so easily, but evidently it was so.

"I killed it!" yelled the axeman, brandishing his gory weapon. "I killed it!" His comrades roared in triumph then hurled themselves at the legionnaires with renewed savagery.

With the fiend gone and rioters circling to get behind their remaining adversaries, the advancing line wasn't viable anymore.

The legionnaires needed a formation that would enable them to guard each other's backs.

"Square!" Nular bellowed. "Square!"

But they couldn't form one. The enemies swarming on them from every side, grabbing and beating at them, made it impossible to maneuver. Pivoting, fighting with his sword in one hand and his cudgel in the other, Nular realized the press had suddenly grown so thick that he couldn't even see his men anymore, just hear the clangor of their opponents' blows pounding on their shields.

That clashing noise diminished as, no doubt, the legionnaires fell one by one. Something smashed or cut into Nular's knee, and he dropped too. His injured leg ablaze with pain, he glimpsed men running toward the conjurors' Chapter house, then a burly laborer lifted a shovel high and plunged the edge down at his throat.

At first, Faurgar Stayanoga thought, it had made sense. They'd take to the streets as the priest in the alehouse had urged, and when the zulkirs saw how many they were, and how displeased, they'd have to rethink their decision.

More than that, it had been fun. Intoxicating. His whole life, Faurgar had walked warily in the presence of Red Wizards, legionnaires, or any Mulan really, but tonight, roaming the streets with hundreds like himself, he hadn't been afraid of anyone. They'd all said whatever they wanted as loud as they wanted. Defaced, smashed, and torched whatever they wanted. Broken into shops and taverns and taken whatever they wanted.

But he was scared, because the legions had turned out in force to deal with the disturbance, and he and his friends were trapped, with blood ores advancing from one side and human

warriors from the other. The ores leered and howled their piercing battle cries. The men strode quietly, with faces like stone, but despite their differing attitudes, both companies looked entirely ready to kill.

Faurgar looked up and down the street and found nowhere to run. Some of his companions pounded on doors, but no

one would open to them. Evidently hoping the legionnaires would spare the lives of any who surrendered, others raised their hands or dropped to their knees. The rest, defiant still, brandished the knives and tools that were all they possessed in the way of weapons.

Faurgar simply stood, mouth dry, heart pounding, uncertain of what he ought to do. It didn't look to him as if the guards intended to spare anyone, and if so, it seemed better to go down fighting. But if he was wrong, if there was even the slightest chance of surviving...

By the Great Flame, how had he come to this? He was the son of respectable parents and a journeyman mason. He didn't belong in the middle of this nightmare.

The ores reached the first kneeling man. Steel flashed, blood spurted, and the penitent collapsed to flop and twitch like a fish out of water. Soldiers trampled him as they continued to advance.

All right, thought Faurgar, now we know for certain that they mean to kill us all. So fight! But he didn't know if he could. Tears were blurring his vision, and even if they hadn't been, the urge to cringe was so strong that he could hardly bear even to look at the warriors. How, then, could he possibly strike a blow?

As if too full of bloodlust to permit their human comrades an equal share in the killing, the ores abruptly screamed and charged. One ran straight at Faurgar.

Fight! he told himself, but when he tried to raise his trowel, his hand shook so badly that he dropped it. Knowing it was craven and useless, but powerless to control himself, he crouched and shielded his torso and face with his arms.

And as if the Storm Lord were responding to the spectacle of his wretchedness, the night burned white. Prodigious booms shook the earth, and torrents of frigid rain hammered down, ringing on the legionnaires' armor and drumming on everything else.

The legionnaires faltered in shock. Barely audible over the

thunder and the downpour, the commander of the ores bellowed at his troops. Faurgar couldn't speak their language, but he had a fair idea of what the gray-skinned creature was saying: It's only rain! Go on and kill the rabble as I ordered you to!

The ores moved to obey, then a flare of lightning struck a peaked rooftop on the right-hand side of the street. The flash was blinding, the crash loud enough to jab pain into Faurgar's ears, and everyone froze once more.

One of the human soldiers shouted and pointed. Blinking, Faurgar reflexively glanced to see what had caught the legionnaire's attention. He expected to observe that the thunderbolt had set the shingled roof on fire, but it wasn't so. Rather, a tall, thin man in a red robe stood in the middle of the charred and blackened place where the lightning had struck, as if he'd ridden the bolt down from the sky.

"That's Szass Tam!" someone exclaimed, and certainly the guards were coming to attention and saluting. Faurgar and his fellows knelt.

The lich's dark gaze raked over them all, warrior and cornered troublemaker alike. "This won't do," he said. He seemed to speak without raising his voice, yet despite the din of the storm, Faurgar could hear him clearly from yards away.

"Unlike some," Szass Tam continued, "I'm not eager to see Thayan soldiers slaughtering Thayan citizens, not as long as there's any hope of avoiding it. Accordingly, you legionnaires

will give these people one last chance to disperse and retire to their homes in peace."

"Yes, Your Omnipotence!" the commander of the human guards shouted.

"And you citizens," the necromancer said, "will do precisely that. I understand that you've behaved as you have out of concern for the realm, and to that degree, your patriotism does you credit, but you can't accomplish anything by

damaging your own city and compelling the guards to take harsh action against you. I promise a better outlet for your energies in the days to come.

"Now go," he concluded, and a heartbeat later, inexplicably, he was gone. Faurgar had been looking straight at him, yet had a muddled sense that he hadn't actually seen the wizard vanish.

The human officer barked orders. His company divided in the middle, clearing a corridor for Faurgar and his companions to scurry along. The ores scowled but offered no protest. Szass Tam was their zulkir too.

Their zulkir, and the greatest person in the world. Thanks to him, Faurgar was going to live.

Malark stood at the casement watching the lightning dance above the city. The peaceful city. Even those folk who hadn't had the opportunity to hear Szass Tam speak had discovered that cold, blinding, stinging rain washed the fun out of looting, vandalism, and assault, or in the case of the legionnaires, it dissolved their zeal to chase those guilty of such offenses.

The door clicked open behind him, and he smelled the perfume Dmitra was wearing tonight. He turned and knelt.

"Rise," she said, crossing his darkened, austere furnished room, a silver goblet in her hand. "I've received a message from Szass Tam. He's retiring to his estate in High Thay for the time

being. I can contact him there, but the implication is that I should refrain except in case of an emergency."

"Do you think he knows you warned the other zulkirs of his intentions?"

"By the Black Hand, I hope not. I also hope it was the right thing to do. My instincts told me it was, and they've rarely played me false, but still..." She shook her head.

"If I may say so, Tharchion, you look tired. If you don't feel ready to sleep, shall we sit and watch the storm together?"

"Why not?" He moved a pair of chairs up to the window and

she sank down into one of them. "Do you have anything to drink, or must I call for a servant?"

"No wine." Now that she'd come closer, he knew what she'd been drinking. He could smell it on her breath despite the overlay of perfume. "But some of that Hillsfar brandy you like."

"That will do."

As he passed behind her to fetch clean cups and the decanter, he automatically thought of how to kill her where she sat. One sudden blow or stranglehold, and no magic would save her, but he didn't actually feel the urge to strike. Aside from the inconvenience to himself, obliged to give up a congenial position and flee Thay just when life here was becoming truly interesting, there wouldn't be anything profoundly appropriate or exceptionally beautiful about the death. Dmitra was his benefactor, perhaps even in a certain sense his friend, and she deserved better.

She sipped brandy and gazed out at the tempest. "You have to give Szass Tam credit," she said after a time. "First he incites what could have been the worst riot in the history of Eltabbar. He even tricks the mob into believing Nevron and the conjurors sent demons to kill them. Then he ends the crisis in the gentlest way possible, making himself a hero to every person who feared for his life and chattels, every rioter who escaped punishment, and any legionnaire who was squeamish about killing other Thayans."

Malark smiled. "While simultaneously demonstrating just how powerful he is. I assume it's difficult to spark a storm in a clear sky."

"Yes, though we Thayans have been the masters of our weather for a long while. I'm actually more impressed by the way he appeared in dozens of places around the city all at the same moment. Obviously, people were actually seeing projected images, yet by all accounts, the phantasms didn't behave identically. They oriented on the folk they were

addressing, and if anyone dared to speak to them in turn, they deviated from the standard declaration to answer back. I'm a Red Wizard of Illusion, and I have no idea how one would go about managing that." She laughed. "And this is the creature I opted to betray."

"But with considerable circumspection, so instead of fretting over what can't be undone, perhaps it would be more productive to contemplate what's just occurred. What game is Szass Tam playing now?"

"I don't know, but you're right, he is still playing. Otherwise, what's the point of the riot?"

"He must realize now that the other zulkirs will never proclaim him regent no matter how much he makes lesser folk adore him."

A gust of wind rattled the casement in its frame.

"I wonder," Dmitra said. "Suppose he murders another zulkir or two. Suppose he tempts one or more of those who remain with the office of vice-regent, subordinate to himself but superior to all others. Sounds better than death, doesn't it?"

It didn't to Malark, but he didn't bother saying so. "Now that I think about it, the various orders must be full of Red Wizards who'd love to move up to be zulkir, even if the rank was no longer a position of ultimate authority. It's easy to imagine one or more

of them collaborating with Szass Tam. They work together to assassinate Nevron, Samas Kul, or whomever, get the traitor elected to replace him, and afterward the fellow acts as the lich's dutiful supporter."

Dmitra nodded. "It could happen just that way, but not easily, not when Szass Tam needs a majority on the council, and not with all the other zulkirs now striving assiduously to keep themselves safe. I actually think the game has entered a new phase."

"Which is?"

"I wish I knew." She laughed. "I must seem like a pathetic coward. It's one zulkir against six, who now enjoy my

support, yet I'm frightened of the outcome. I have an ugly feeling none of us has ever truly taken Szass Tarn's measure, whereas he knows our every strength and weakness. I can likewise imagine our very abundance of archmages proving a hindrance. The lich is a single genius with a coherent strategy maneuvering against a band of keen but lesser minds bickering and working at cross purposes."

"Then you'll have to make sure that, no matter what the zulkirs imagine, it's actually you calling the tune."

"A good trick if I can manage it, whereas your task is to figure out what Szass Tam means to do next."

Malark grinned. "Even though I've never met him, and you tell me he's a genius. It should prove an interesting challenge."



## Chapter thirteen

### 13-14 Kythom, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Borrowing Brightwing's eyes to combat the darkness, Aoth rode the griffon above the mountainsides on the northern edge of the valley. It was a necessary chore. As far as the Thayans could tell, after they'd chased the undead up the pass, the creatures had retreated into the Keep of Thazar, but it was possible they hadn't all done so. Even if they had, with flying wraiths and ghouls possessing a preternatural ability to dig tunnels among their company, it was by no means a certainty that they'd all remain inside the walls. Ergo, someone had to make sure no enemy was slinking through the night.

"It didn't have to be you," Brightwingsaid, catching the tenor of his thoughts. "You're an officer now, remember? You could have sent a common soldier and stayed in camp to guzzle beer and rut with your female."

"I know." Maybe he hadn't been a captain long enough to delegate such tasks as he ought. He'd so often served as a scout,

advance guard, or outrider that he still felt a need to observe things for himself whenever possible. "But you're getting fat. We need to work some of the lard off your furry arse."

Brightwing clashed her beak shut in feigned irritation at the jibe then exclaimed, "Look there!"

Two beings were descending a slope. One was a living man—a Mulan, to judge from his lanky physique, though his head and chin weren't properly shaved—wearing a sword. Evidently he was a refugee who'd somehow avoided death at the hands of the undead infesting the valley. Gliding along behind him, perceptible primarily as a mote of cold, aching wrongness, was some sort of ghost. No doubt it was stalking him and would attack when ready, though Aoth couldn't imagine what it was waiting on.

Lady Luck must love you, the war mage silently told the

refugee, to keep you alive until Brightwing and I arrived. With a thought, he sent the griffon swooping lower then flourished his spear and rattled off an incantation.

Darts of blue light hurtled from the head of the lance to pierce the phantom through. The punishment made it more visible, though it was just a pale shadow with a hint of armor in its shape and the suggestion of a blade extending from its hand. It rose into the air as Aoth had hoped it would. He wanted to draw it away from the man on the ground.

"Run!" Aoth shouted.

Instead, the stranger called, "Don't attack him! He's my guide! Mirror, don't fight! Come back to me!"

Aoth hesitated. Was the man a necromancer and "Mirror" his familiar?

Maybe not, because the ghost kept on flying at Aoth and his mount, and after his recent experiences with the undead, he had no intention of giving it the benefit of the doubt. He wheeled Brightwing in an attempt of keep away from the spirit

and chanted words of power. For a moment, Mirror wavered into a short, broad, better-defined figure not unlike himself, then melted into blur once more.

"Stop!" the refugee roared, and his voice echoed from the mountainsides like thunder.

A palpable jolt made Brightwing screech and spoiled the mystic gesture necessary for the completion of Aoth's spell. Mirror's misty substance rippled like water, and then it—or he—floated back down toward the stranger like a hound called to heel.

With their psyches linked, Aoth could taste Brightwing's anger almost as if it were his own. She believed the man they'd been seeking to rescue had treacherously attacked them, but striving for clarity of thought despite the flare of emotion, Aoth discerned that the magical cry hadn't actually injured her, and the stranger had targeted both her and Mirror. Maybe he'd just been trying to halt the confrontation

without harm to any of the parties involved.

"Calm yourself," he told the griffon. "Let's land and talk to him."

"I'd rather land and tear him apart," Brightwing snarled, but once she'd furled her wings and glided to the ground, she held her position several paces away from Mirror and the stranger.

Not so sure of the peculiar duo's benign intentions that he cared to dismount, Aoth remained in the saddle. "I'm Aoth Fezim, captain and battle wizard in the Griffon Legion of Pyarados. Who are you, and what are you doing wandering in this region?"

"My name is Bareris Anskuld," the stranger replied, and when Aoth viewed him up close, his haggard weariness was apparent. Weariness and something more. He had a bleakness about him, as if something of vital importance to him had gone horribly, irreparably awry. "A bard and sellsword. I've been lost in the mountains and trying to find my way out. I met Mirror, and he chose to lead me. Is that the Pass of Thazar below us?" "Yes."

"Good. Thank you for the information and for trying to help when you thought I was in danger. Mirror and I will move on now, if it's all right with you."

Aoth snorted. "No, musician, it's not 'all right.' You need to give a better account of yourself than that, considering that my comrades and I are fighting a war of sorts in the vale."

"A war? With whom?"

"Undead that came out of the mountains to the north, the same as you and your ghost friend."

The bard's eyes narrowed, and though he seemed no less despondent than before, his taut expression now bespoke a bitter resolve. "In that case, Captain, you should hear my tale in its entirety."

It had taken most of the night to put the little meeting together while making sure none of the necromancers

learned of it, and eyes smarting, nerves raw with tension and lack of sleep, Nymia Focar looked around the shadowy tent at the other three folk in attendance and found something to dislike in each of them.

Though evidently a Mulan of sorts and gifted with a facility for one of the lesser forms of magic, Bareris Anskuld was essentially a filthy, ragged vagabond. It was preposterous to imagine he had anything of importance to relate.

Despite his advanced years and the forfeiture of his rest, Milsantos Daramos, Tharchion of Thazalhar, looked fresh and alert and stood straight as a spear shaft. He'd even taken the trouble to put on his armor. That was reason enough to dislike

the old man with his seamed face and shaggy white brows even if she hadn't resented the necessity of begging his aid to salvage her province and the fact that everyone considered him a better commander than herself.

She found, however, that Aoth vexed her most of all. The half-breed had his uses, but she never should have promoted him. The pressures of command had evidently disposed him to absurd apprehensions and fancies. Rather to her embarrassment, he'd already blathered about them in one council of war, and here he was, making a fool of himself again, and dressing her in motley and bells as well.

For he'd somehow managed to persuade her to give Bareris a hearing in the covert manner he desired, and she winced to think what might happen if the Red Wizards learned she'd gone behind their backs.

She supposed that meant it behooved her to get this nonsense over with as rapidly as possible, to minimize the possibility of anyone else finding out about it. "Let's hear it," she rapped.

Aoth had already given her the gist of the story in terse summation, but Bareris told it in detail and was more persuasive than she'd expected. Perhaps the very strangeness of the tale made it seem more credible, for how

—to say nothing of why—would anyone make such things up?

But she wanted the story to be false. Since her audience with the zulkirs and Iphegor Nath, everything had gone splendidly, until she was ready to retake the Keep of Thazar itself. The lack of siege equipment shouldn't prove an insurmountable obstacle if the Burning Braziers performed as promised. She didn't need complications arising at the last moment.

So she did her best to pick holes in Bareris's story. "If you wanted to take slaves into the mountains, why not just march them there directly? Why bother with Delhumide and a portal?"

"Because they didn't want anyone to see the thralls going east," Bareris answered, "lest he draw a connection between them and the raiders."

"Also," said Milsantos, idly fingering a raised gilded rune on his breastplate, "it would be easier. The Sunrise Mountains are difficult terrain to negotiate and swarming with wild goblin and kobold tribes to boot."

"Still," she said, "where's the proof this story is true?"

"The proof," Aoth said, "is that Bareris's report illuminates matters we couldn't understand before. The enemy was able to overcome the priest in Thazar Keep, send lacedons swimming downriver, and reanimate the folk they slaughtered in such quantities because they aren't all undead. Some are living necromancers."

"That isn't proof," she snapped, "it's speculation."

She realized she craved a drink, and despite a suspicion that, tired and upset as she was, it would do her more harm than good, she picked up a half-finished bottle of wine. The cork made a popping sound as she pulled it out.

"Tharchion," Bareris said, "if my word isn't good enough, let me tell my story to one of the Burning Braziers. He can use clerical magic to verify that I'm speaking the truth."

Nymia had no desire to involve another person in their

deliberations. Besides, she abruptly discerned that, much as she'd struggled to deny the perception, her instincts told her the bard was being honest.

She looked around for a clean cup, couldn't find one—she'd allowed her orderly to retire earlier—and swigged sweet white wine from the neck of the bottle. The stuff immediately roiled her stomach.

"For purposes of argument," she said, "let's say you are telling the truth as best you understand it. Your story suggests we're facing a cartel of rogue necromancers, traitors to their order."

"Maybe," said Milsantos, "and maybe not. I have informants in Eltabbar. I'm sure you do too, but have you heard from yours in the past couple days? Mine got a letter to me."

"And they said something pertinent to our situation here on the eastern border of the realm?"

"Perhaps. Two days ago, Szass Tam tried and failed to persuade the other zulkirs to proclaim him regent. In light of that, let's consider recent events."

"To have any hope of winning the council to his way of thinking," said Aoth, "the lich had to seem a successful if not triumphant figure, so he manufactured a threat to the eastern tharchs then played a crucial role in combating it. That means it isn't 'rogue' mages standing against us. It's conceivable the entire order of Necromancy is involved, including the Red Wizards in our own army."

"Impossible," Nymia said. "No one could keep such a huge conspiracy secret."

"He could," Bareris said, "if he silenced his underlings with enchantment. I told you about the guard who died when I tried to question it."

"That was an ore. No one would dare to lay such a binding on a Red Wizard."

"A higher-ranking and more powerful Red Wizard would."

"Curse it!" she exclaimed. "Even if all these crazy guesses are correct, don't you see, it's none of our business what

games the zulkirs play with one another. All we need to know is that an undead host threatens Pyarados, and the council, Szass Tam included, wants us to destroy it."

"What," said Milsantos, "if Szass Tam has stopped wanting it? He desired our victories to advance a particular strategy, which has now failed. In the aftermath, what remains? A siege in which his followers and creatures are fighting on both sides. Can we be absolutely certain he's still backing us?"

"Why would he stop?" she demanded.

"To create the impression that when Szass Tam is honored as is his due, things go well, but when the other zulkirs deny him, they go disastrously awry? Truly, Nymia, I can't guess, but I shrink from the thought of what will happen if the necromancers and zombies in our own ranks suddenly turn on us in the midst of battle. Better, I think, to try our luck without them."

"So we send them away? Restrain them? Insult Szass Tam and the entire order of Necromancy?"

The old warrior smiled a crooked smile. "When you put it like that, it's not an appealing prospect, is it? We'd certainly need to win and hope our success would motivate the other zulkirs to shield us from the lich's displeasure."

"I don't know if we even have the authority to deal with Red Wizards in such a manner."

"You're tharchions," said Aoth. "This is an army in the field. The Burning Braziers will support you. They hate the necromancers condescending to them. Take the authority."

She considered it for several heartbeats then shook her head. "No. Not without proof, and I mean something I can see with my own eyes, not just a wanderer's tale, even should a cleric vouch for him."

"Then I'll interrogate one of your Red Wizards," Bareris said. "He'll tell the truth or die in a fit like the ore. Either way, you can be certain."

Nymia hesitated. "Neither Tharchion Daramos nor I could

consent to such an outrage. You'd have to act alone, without our aid or intercession, and if you failed to extort the proof you promise, we'd order your execution. It would be the only way to make sure the stink of your treason didn't attach itself to us."

Bareris shrugged as if the prospect of a slow death under torture was of no concern. "Fine."

"Except," said Aoth, "that you won't have to do it alone. I'll help, and I know a fire priestess who will too." He grinned. "Now that I think of it, I can steer you to the perfect Red Wizard as well."

Bareris crooned his charm of silence, each note softer than the one before. He centered the charm on the sword sheathed at this side. It seemed as good an anchor point as any.

With the final note, the camp, quiet already here in the dregs of the night, fell absolutely silent. He, Aoth, Chathi, and Mirror, only perceptible as the vaguest hint of visual distortion, sneaked up to the rear of Urhur Hahpet's spacious, sigil-embroidered tent a few breaths later.

Aoth gave Chathi an inquiring look. Even without benefit of words, his meaning was plain. He was asking if she was certain she wanted to risk this particular venture. She responded with an expression that expressed assurance, impatience, and affection all at once.

The lovers' interplay gave Bareris a fresh pang of heartache. He turned away and peered about to make certain no one was looking in their direction. Nobody was, so he drew his dagger, cut a peephole in the tent, and looked inside.

No lamps or candles burned within. Evidently even necromancers, who worked so much of their wizardry at night, had to sleep sometime. But Bareris had sharpened his sight with magic, and he could make out a figure wrapped in blankets lying on the cot.

He gave his comrades a nod, then reinserted his dagger in the hole and pulled it downward, cutting a slit large enough



for a man to squirm through, as he proceeded to do.

With the tent now enveloped in silence, he had no need to tiptoe, so he simply strode toward the man in the camp bed.

But

before he could cross the intervening space, something small and gray leaped onto Urhur Hahpet's chest, then, eyes burning with greenish phosphorescence, immediately launched itself at Bareris's face.

It was a zombie or mummified cat, evidently reanimated to watch over its master as he slept. Bareris swung his arm and batted it out of the air. It scrambled up and charged him.

Though the shriveled, stinking thing wasn't large enough to seem all that dire a threat, Bareris suspected its darkened fangs and claws might well be poisonous, either innately or because Urhur painted them with venom. Accordingly, he felt he had to deal with the cat at once. He shifted the knife to his off hand, whipped out his sword, and drove the point into the undead animal's back, nailing it to the earth. It made a final frenzied scrabbling attempt to reach his foot then stopped moving. The sheen in its eyes faded.

By then, though, Urhur had cast off his covers and was rearing up from the bed. The silence would keep him from reciting incantations, and since he didn't sleep in his clothes, he didn't have his spell foci ready to hand, but he was wearing a presumably enchanted necklace of small bones and grasping a crooked blackwood wand he'd apparently stashed beneath his blankets or pillow. He extended the arcane weapon in the intruders' direction.

Bareris yanked his sword out of the feline carcass, sprang forward, and poised the weapon to strike at the wand. At the same instant, a gout of dark fire, or something like it, leaped from the end of the wand to chill him. Refusing to let the freezing anguish stop him, he delivered the beat, and the wand flew from Urhur's grasp.

Bareris and his comrades had observed two withered, yellow-eyed dread warriors standing guard in front of the

tent, and now the sentries pushed through the flap of cloth covering the

doorway. He'd hoped the magical silence would keep them from discerning that their master needed them, but perhaps they were responding to a psychic summons.

Though Bareris hadn't taken his eyes off his foes to glance around and check, he assumed Aoth, Mirror, and Chathi were likewise inside the tent by now, and he'd depend on them to deal with the dread warriors. He had to stay focused on Urhur, because the Red Wizard merely needed to scurry into the open air, dart beyond the confines of the zone of silence, and scream for help to ruin his plan.

He tried to lame Urhur with a slash to the leg. The necromancer flung himself backward into the taut canvas wall of the tent, rebounded, and landed on the ground behind the cot. Fearful that Urhur would squirm out under the bottom of the cloth barrier, Bareris dropped his dagger, grabbed the camp bed, and jerked it out of his way.

Meanwhile, Urhur gripped one of the bones strung around his neck, and a seething dimness shrouded his form. Still aiming for the leg, Bareris thrust. Urhur tried to snatch his limb out of the way, but the blade grazed him even so.

Malignancy burned up the sword and into Bareris's hand, chilling and stinging him like the blast from the wand. Urhur scrambled up and reached for him. A tattoo on the back of the necromancer's hand gleamed, releasing its power, whereupon his nails grew long and jagged as the claws of a ghoul.

By the time Bareris recovered from the shock of the hurt he'd just sustained, Urhur had already lunged near enough to rend and grab, too close for the sword to be of use. Bareris dropped the weapon and caught the mage by the wrists.

They wrestled, shoving and staggering back and forth, and as they did so, the bard caught glimpses of the rest of the fight. Aoth swung his falchion, its heavy blade shining blue with enchantment, and buried it in a dread warrior's chest.

The

creature stumbled, and Mirror, somewhat more visible now, his shadow weapon currently shaped like Aoth's, struck it as well. Meanwhile, Chathi brandished a hand wreathed in fire, and the other undead guard collapsed before her, breaking and crumbling in the process.

Bareris thought he should be faring as well or better than his comrades. He was stronger than Urhur and a superior brawler, but he didn't dare risk even a single scratch from the wizard's nails for fear it would incapacitate him, and every time he landed a head butt or stamp to the toes, his adversary's protective aura caused the impact to pain him as well.

Urhur abruptly opened his mouth wide, revealing that his teeth, too, had grown long and pointed. He yanked Bareris close and bit at his neck. Caught by surprise, the bard just barely managed to jerk his upper body backward in time. Drops of saliva splattered him as the crooked fangs gnashed shut.

Then, however, Urhur lurched forward, and his legs buckled beneath him. Employing the pommel of his falchion as a bludgeon, Aoth clubbed the necromancer's head a second time. Urhur slumped entirely limp. Sore and weak from the punishment he'd endured, Bareris tore away the necklace of bones, depriving the Red Wizard of his defensive aura, then threw him to the ground.

Aoth's falchion glowed brighter as he released the counter-spell he'd stored in the steel. Bareris abruptly heard the rasp of his own labored breathing as the spell of silence dissolved. Meanwhile, Urhur's claws and fangs melted away.

"Are you all right?" Aoth whispered.

"When this is over," Bareris replied, "I'll want the aid of a healer, but I can manage for now."

Chathi moved to the door of the tent, shifted the flap, and peeked out. "I don't think anyone's noticed anything amiss."

"Good," said Aoth. "Can you restore Urhur to his senses?"

"Most likely." She rooted in her belt pouch, produced a pewter vial, uncorked it, and held it under the Red Wizard's nose.

Urhur's eyes fluttered open, then he flailed, but to little effect. Bareris, Aoth, and Chathi were crouching all around him to hold him down and menace him with their daggers.

"Calm down," said Aoth. "You probably realize I don't like you, but my friends and I won't kill you if you answer our questions."

"You're insane," Urhur said. "You'll all die for this outrage."

Aoth smiled. "Yes, if it doesn't work out, which means we have nothing to lose. If I were you, I'd think about the implications of that."

Perhaps seeking to calm himself, Urhur took a deep breath.

"Very well, I'll answer your questions. In all likelihood, I would have done so in any case. I have no secrets."

"If so," said Aoth, "you must be the only Red Wizard who can make that claim, but before we proceed, I want you to think about something. I just cast a counterspell. Bareris and Chathi are each going to do the same. I hope that if anyone has laid a magical binding on you, it will turn out that one of us has succeeded in breaking your fetters, and you can give us what we require without suffering for it."

"I have no idea what you're babbling about."

"I admit," Aoth continued, "if you do tell the truth, you'll be running a risk. We'll have no way of knowing in advance whether we've actually freed you, but I guarantee that if your responses fail to satisfy us, we'll kill you. Bareris, Chathi, do what you need to do."

Bareris sang his charm, and the priestess chanted her invocation to the Firelord.

"Now," said Aoth to the prisoner, "tell us who created the undead horde."

Urhur's eyes shifted left, then right, as if he was looking for succor. "How should I know? All anyone knows is that they came down out of the mountains." "You're lying," said Aoth.

He clamped a hand over the necromancer's mouth, and Bareris and Chathi exerted their strength to hold him motionless. Mirror glided forward, bent down, and slid his shadowy fingertips into Urhur's torso.

It wasn't the sort of violation that broke the skin, shed blood, or made any sort of visible wound, but Urhur bucked and thrashed in agony. His body grew thinner, and new lines incised themselves on his face.

"Enough," Bareris said, and Mirror pulled his hand away.

"I'll wager," said Aoth to Urhur, "that you've unleashed ghosts and such on a good many victims in your time, but I wonder if you'd ever felt a phantom's touch yourself. It looked painful, and you look older. I wouldn't be surprised if Mirror has leeches years from your natural span. Now shall we have him tickle your guts again, or will you cooperate?"

"I don't deserve this," Urhur whimpered. "Szass Tam didn't give me a choice. When I tried to keep you from discovering too much or warning Tharchion Focar and the other captains, I didn't even understand what I was doing. I mean, not entirely. My memory's funny. It's like I'm split in two."

"Just tell us," said Aoth. "Where did the marauders come from?"

"Why do I have to say? It's plain you already know." "We need to hear," the war mage said. "All right, curse you. My peers made them." "And helped them to their victories?" "Yes!"

"What are your orders now that you and the other Red Wizards in this army are supposed to fight the nighthaunt and its primary host yourselves?"

"I—" Urhur's eyes rolled up in his head.

His back arched and his limbs jerked as the dying one's had done. He jerked in a final great spasm that broke Chathi's grip on his arm then lay motionless with bloody foam oozing from the corner of his mouth.

The fire priestess placed her hand in front of Urhur's contorted features, feeling for his breath. After a moment,

she said, "He's dead."

"Damn it," said Aoth. "I'd hoped we'd forestalled that. Obviously, we only delayed it. Still, he admitted some things. Enough, I hope, to spare us a meeting with the headsman." He looked back at the slit in the rear of the tent. Clad in long, plain, hooded cloaks like many a common legionnaire, two figures pushed through the opening then threw back their cowls to reveal themselves as Nymia and Milsantos. The tharchions had trailed Bareris and his comrades up to the tent, then skulked outside to listen to the interrogation.

"You've done well," Milsantos said.

"They've made a filthy mess," Nymia growled. "They attacked and killed a Red Wizard, and we still don't know that the necromancers mean to betray us."

"If they don't," Bareris asked, "then why couldn't Urhur say so? Why was that the question that finally triggered the seizure?"

"I don't know," the female commander answered. "I don't pretend to comprehend all the ins and outs of wizardry, but if Szass Tam only changed his plans after the other zulkirs rebuffed him, how could he already have sent new orders to minions hundreds of miles away from Eltabbar?"

"The same way," said Milsantos, "my informants passed a message to me: magic."

"I suppose," Nymia said. "Still—"

"Still," Milsantos said, "you don't like it that we have, in effect, colluded in the murder of a Red Wizard, and you shrink from the thought of making a whole troupe of them our prisoners. So do I. I didn't come to be an old man, let alone retain my office for so these many decades, by indulging in such practices. But we now have genuine reason to suspect the necromancers of treachery, and I won't send legionnaires into battle with such folk < positioned to strike at their backs. They deserve better, and so do we. Remember, if we lose, the enemy is apt to kill us, too,

and if they don't, the zulkirs might."

"Yet if we anger Szass Tam and the order of Necromancy ..."  
Nymia threw up her hands. "Yes, all right, we'll do it your way, assuming we even have followers stupid enough to lay hands on Red Wizards."

Chathi smiled. "The Braziers will help you, Tharchion."

"And I," said Aoth, "know griffon riders who'll do the same."

Malark jumped, caught the top of the high wrought-iron fence with its row of sharp points, and swung himself over without cutting himself or even snagging his clothing. He then dropped to the grass on the other side, his knees flexing to absorb the jolt.

As one of Dmitra Flass's lieutenants, he actually had no need to enter in such a fashion. He could have presented himself at the gate and waited for the watchman to appear and admit him or procured his own key, but why bother? For a man trained as a Monk of the Long Death, hopping the fence was easy as climbing a flight of stairs.

Alert and silent by habit, not because he expected trouble, he strolled onward through Eltabbar's largest cemetery. The meadows with their stone and wooden markers were peaceful after dark.

He often came here where no one could find and interrupt him to mull over one problem or another.

But tonight he found the place less soothing than formerly. The air was pleasant, neither too hot nor too cool, and perfumed with the scent of flowers. A night bird sang, and the stars shone, but the sight of so many open graves, yawning like raw wounds in the earth, offended him. Death was supposed to be an ending, but for the poor wretches interred here, it had only been a brief respite. They'd toil and struggle on through the mortal world as zombie soldiers. Yet much as Malark deplored Thay's practice of employing such warriors, he could do nothing about it. So he scowled and resolved to put the matter out of his mind and focus instead on the puzzle he needed to unravel.

Szass Tam had manipulated events to persuade the council of zulkirs to elect him regent. His efforts had failed, yet it was plain he was still maneuvering. To what end?

Malark had reviewed all the intelligence available to him, all the secrets his agents daily risked their lives to gather, and he still had no idea. It was almost enough to discourage him, to persuade him that Szass Tam was as transcendently brilliant as everyone maintained, so cunning and devious that no other being could hope to fathom his schemes.

But Malark refused to concede that. Though he was no wizard nor, thank the gods, a lich, he was as old as Szass Tam, and his extended span had afforded him the opportunity to develop a comparable subtlety of mind. No doubt the undead necromancer possessed the power to obliterate a mere excommu-nicant monk with a flick of his shriveled fingers, but that didn't mean he could outthink him.

The spymaster wandered by another pair of gaping graves, which still stank of carrion even though their former occupants were gone. He'd passed quite a few such cavities in just a short

while, and he suddenly wondered if anyone except Szass Tam and his followers knew how many had been opened altogether or whether all the corpses really had gone to serve Tharchions Focar and Daramos, the commanders who'd marched up the Pass of Thazar to counter a threat in the east.

He whirled and dashed back the way he'd come, meanwhile wondering if Dmitra was already asleep or amusing herself with a lover. If so, she wouldn't appreciate being disturbed, but Malark needed another flying horse, and he needed it now.

The sky above the mountains was blue, but as one pivoted toward the Keep of Thazar, it darkened by degrees, so that the castle seemed to stand in a private pocket of night.

As yet, Aoth hadn't seen the nighthaunt or any of the



undead except for a few ghouls and skeletons on the battlements, but he had little doubt the winged creature was responsible for the shroud of darkness. He recalled the boundless malevolence of the nighthaunt's blank pearly eyes, the contemptuous way it had allowed him to escape—because Szass Tam wanted news of the attack to travel, evidently—and all the horrors he'd witnessed on the night the fortress fell, and despite himself, he shivered.

His reaction annoyed him and made him wish the battle would begin. Once the waiting ended, his jitters should end with it. They always had.

Unfortunately, it wasn't time yet. First, the Burning Braziers had to complete their ritual, and unless it succeeded, the legionnaires had no hope of a successful assault.

To better survey the castle and the army arrayed before it, Aoth had ascended a hillock with Brightwing and Bareris—and Mirror too, presumably, though the spirit was entirely imperceptible at present—and so he turned to the singer.

Though bards were generally garrulous to a fault, following their interrogation of Urhur Hahpet, Bareris had lapsed into sullen taciturnity. But perhaps Aoth could draw him into a conversation. He was still curious about the man, and it would be something to occupy his mind.

"It will be a tough fight," said Aoth, "but we can win. Even without our zombies, we have a sizable army, and even without the necromancers, we have wizardry. I'm not the only war mage in the host."

Bareris grunted.

"Of course," Aoth persisted, "we wouldn't have a chance if not for you. Makes me glad you asked to fight in my company." "Don't be. My luck is bad."

Aoth snorted. "I'd say you were damn lucky to make it out of the mountains alive, and we were lucky you turned up here when you did."

Bareris shrugged. "The gravecrawler said I still had a path to walk, and maybe this is it. Revenge. As much as I can take,

for as long as I'm able."

Aoth was still trying to decide how to answer that when the ground began to shake. The Burning Braziers had warned their comrades of what to expect, but some of the soldiers standing in formation in front of the castle cried out anyway.

"This is it," Aoth said.

He swung himself onto Brightwing's back, and the griffon beat her wings and soared into the air. Bareris trotted to join the axemen he intended to fight among.

The tremors intensified, and men-at-arms on the ground crouched to avoid being knocked down. Riders and grooms struggled to control frightened horses. Trees lashed back and forth, and stones rolled clattering down the mountainsides, until something huge and bright burst from the empty stretch of ground between the Keep of Thazar and the besieging army.

At first an observer could have mistaken it for a simple eruption of lava. Then, however, it heaved itself higher, and the contours of a lump of a head; a thick, flailing arm; and a hand with four stubby fingers became apparent.

Tall and massive as one of the castle towers, the searing heat of it perceptible even from far away, the colossal elemental finished dragging itself up out of the ground then clambered unsteadily onto its broad, toeless feet. Some of the legionnaires shrank from the terrifying spectacle. Others, remembering that this was supposed to happen, cheered.

Aoth thought the mystical feat deserved acclamation. Had the Burning Braziers summoned and bound a fire elemental big as a spire, that would have been impressive enough. But such an entity, formidable as it was, lacked the solidity required for the task at hand, so the clerics had opted for a spirit whose nature blended the hunger of flame with the weight of stone. That almost certainly made the magic more difficult for them, given that they lacked any special affinity for the element of earth, yet they'd managed nonetheless.

Its tread shaking the earth, the giant advanced to the castle

wall, took hold of a row of merlons at the top, and ripped away a chunk of the battlements. It tossed the fragment of stone and masonry inside the fortress—to crush some of the enemy, Aoth hoped—and gripped the wall once more.

Ghouls came running and skin kites soared, to leap and plaster themselves onto the elemental like fleas and mosquitoes attaching themselves to a man. The colossus didn't even seem to notice, and the heat of its luminous body charred them to nothing.

Unfortunately, that didn't mean the behemoth would prove impervious to the efforts of ghosts and spellcasters. The former might be able to leech the life from it, and the latter to break the priests' control over it or send it back to its native level of

existence. The Thayan archers and crossbowmen on the ground shot their missiles at any such foe that showed itself on the battlements. Aoth's fellow war mages hurled thunderbolts and fire.

No one with sense would position himself in front of such a barrage or anywhere close, but somebody needed to peer down inside the castle courtyards and counter whatever mischief was happening there. Aoth urged Brightwing higher, and other griffon riders followed his lead. He hoped that if they flew high enough, no stray attack from their own side would hit them.

"If I do catch an arrow in the guts," said Brightwing, discerning the essence of his thoughts, "you'll know when we both plummet to our deaths."

"Put your mind at ease," Aoth replied. "I have a spell of slow falling ready for the casting. Whatever awfulness happens to you, your beloved master will fare all right."

Brightwing laughed.

They raced into the pocket of darkness. Zombies shot crossbows at them, but the bolts flew wild. Brightwing streaked over the curtain wall, and as Aoth had anticipated, live wizards, gathered in circles, were chanting on the

ground below. They'd forsaken red robes for nondescript garments, but they no doubt belonged to the order of Necromancy nonetheless.

Aoth prepared a blast of fire to keep them from interfering with the elemental, but wraiths flew up at him, and he had to use the magic to incinerate them instead. Fortunately, his fellow griffon riders, adept at hitting a mark even from the back of a flying steed, harried the necromancers with arrows. Meanwhile, stone crunched and crashed as the magma giant continued to demolish the exterior wall.

Aoth cast spell after spell, more than he liked with so much fighting still to come, but if he and his allies failed to protect the elemental until it completed its work, it wouldn't matter how much magic remained to him. Phantoms and necromancers

perished, or abandoning their efforts to stop the giant, bolted for cover.

Brightwing wheeled and dived. Arrows loosed by their own allies streaked past her and Aoth, but he saw that she was right to risk that particular hazard in order to respond to a greater one. Possibly cloaked in enchantments that armored them against common missiles, two necromancers had ascended the battlements. Chanting and whirling their hands in mystic passes, they were glaring not at the elemental but at the war mage and his familiar.

Aoth doubted that he could have cast any of his own attack magic before they completed their incantations, but Brightwing reached them in time. Her outstretched talons punched into the torso of the necromancer on the left, while her wing knocked the one on the right off the wall-walk to drop, thud, and lay motionless on the ground below.

The griffon beat her wings, gaining altitude once more. "I guess he didn't have a charm of slow falling."

"Apparently not," Aoth said.

Then Brightwing lifted one wing, dipped the other, and turned, affording him a fresh view of the fortress, and he felt

a reflexive pang of dread.

The nighthaunt had appeared atop the flat, rectangular roof of the central citadel, and despite its apparent lack of a mouth, was attempting magic of its own. Aoth couldn't understand the words of the incantation, but he could hear them inside his mind. Indeed, they pained him like throbs of headache. His fellow griffon riders, those who were still alive, assailed the creature with arrows, but the shafts glanced off its dead black form.

Meanwhile, the elemental was moving more slowly, as if in pain. Glowing chunks of it flaked and sheared away to shatter on the ground.

Aoth hurled lightning at the nighthaunt, but that didn't seem to bother it any more than the arrows. For a moment, he was grimly certain the demonic entity would succeed in destroying the elemental before the latter could break down enough wall to do any good.

But enraged by its agonies, perhaps, the disintegrating giant balled its hands into fists and hammered the stonework repeatedly, then flung its entire body at the barrier as if it were a battering ram. The entity and a broad section of wall smashed into fragments together.

Aoth scrutinized the breach then smiled. He and his allies had hoped the elemental would demolish the entire wall. Due to the nighthaunt's interference, that hadn't happened, but the opening was wide enough for an attacking army to enter in strength, not just a vulnerable few at a time.

The Thayan force cheered. Aoth and the other griffon riders wheeled their mounts and retreated to join their comrades. There was no longer any need to linger in a highly exposed and dangerous position directly above the castle.

It was Aoth's duty to return to his command, but he detoured to set down among the Burning Braziers and the monks who were their bodyguards. He cast about, spied Chathi sitting on the ground, slid off Brightwing, and strode to the fire priestess.

She rose to meet him. Her fire-scarred face was sweaty, with a gray cast to the skin.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine," she said. "It's just that the ritual was taxing, particularly once the nighthaunt tried to oppose us."

"If you aren't fit to fight, you've done plenty already." Even as the words left his mouth, he knew how she'd respond.

"I'm a Burning Brazier. I still have magic to cast, and there's a battle to be won. Of course I'm going to fight!"

"Of course. Just be careful." He wished she still served as a member of his company, where he could better keep an eye on her, but now that the army had reunited, the servants of Kossuth constituted their own unit.

Chathi rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mother. Now go do your job and I'll do mine."

He wanted to kiss her, but it would be inappropriate with others looking on. He touched her forearm in its covering of mail then returned to Brightwing.

As the griffon sprang into the air, she asked, "Are you worried about the priestess for any special reason?"

Aoth sighed. "I suppose not."

"Then that makes it all the more pathetic."

It didn't take Aoth, or any of the officers, long to arrange their companies to their satisfaction. The common legionnaires already knew their parts in the battle plan. Wizards conjured blasts of frost and showers of hail to cool the red-hot scatter of debris that would otherwise obstruct the way, and then the army advanced. Aoth and Brightwing took to the sky once more.

The Thayans proceeded warily. Archers shot at any foe that showed itself on the remaining battlements. Mages cast flares of fire and clerics, pulses of divine power through the breach, in hopes of smiting any creature lying in wait just out of sight on the other side.

Aoth and Brightwing flew over the wall, and spears leveled and shields locked, the first warriors passed through the

breach. Rather to the mage's surprise, at first nothing appeared to oppose their progress, but once a substantial portion of their force had entered, undead exploded from the doors and windows of nearby buildings. Others came racing down the unnaturally benighted lanes leading to the central redoubt or rose over the rooftops. The invaders raised their weapons against the threat.

Surrounded by their floating, luminous runes, quells suddenly materialized among the largest formation of fire priests,

but the guardian monks assailed the creatures with glowing batons and blazing swords and hammered, slashed, and burned the apparitions out of existence. With that threat eliminated, the senior cleric barked a command, and moving as one, the Braziers extended their scarlet metal torches.

Weapons, Aoth suddenly recalled, that Szass Tam had supplied. If the Red Wizards in their company had been poised to betray them, could they rely on these particular devices?

He shouted for the priests not to discharge the torches, but the cacophony of battle was already deafening. Bows groaned and flights of arrows thrummed. Shields crashed as animate corpses hurled themselves against them. Officers bellowed orders, and legionnaires yelled war cries, called for help, or screamed in agony. Nobody noticed one more voice clamoring from overhead.

The red rods exploded in their wielders' hands, flowering into orbs of flame big and hot enough to incinerate the clerics, the monks hovering protectively around them, and any legionnaire unlucky enough to be standing adjacent to the servants of Kossuth. Aoth picked out Chathi an instant before she attempted to use her weapon. She vanished in a flare of yellow, and when that faded a heartbeat later, nothing at all remained.

My fault, thought Aoth, abruptly sick to his stomach. I knew where the torches came from. Why didn't I think to suspect

them before?

Startled, warriors pivoted in the direction of the bursts of flame, then stared aghast as they realized that the majority of the priests, invaluable allies against the undead and an integral part of the tharchions' strategy, were gone. The shadows and skeletons hurled themselves at the living with renewed fury.

Singing, the war chant audible even over the ambient din, Bareris sidestepped a blow from a zombie's flail, riposted with a thrust to the torso, and the gray, rot-speckled creature collapsed. Around him, Mirror—still just a gleaming shadow but more clearly visible than the bard had seen him hitherto—and Aoth's axemen hacked down their own opponents. Bareris knew his battle anthem was feeding vigor and courage to his mortal allies. Perhaps even the ghost derived some benefit.

The Binder knew, they could use all the magical help they could get. Half their troops were still outside the wall, and those who'd already entered were jammed together in a space too small for them to deploy to best advantage. Assuming they survived this initial counterattack, they'd need to battle their way up the relatively narrow streets before assaulting the actual keep at the center of the fortress. As Bareris knew from past experience, that sort of combat was always arduous and apt to exact a heavy toll in lives.

Still, he judged the tharchions were correct. Their plan could work, and the knowledge of that didn't so much assuage as counterbalance the guilt and despair that engulfed him whenever he thought of Tammith. Accordingly, he fought hard, thankful for those moments when the exigencies of combat focused his entire mind on the next cut or parry, more than willing to die to help wreck the necromancers' schemes.

Then yellow light flared behind him, painting the curtain wall and buildings with its glow. He glanced back and saw



the empty space a good many of the Fitelord's servants had occupied only a moment before. Nothing remained of them but scraps of hot, twisted metal and wisps of floating ash.

Farther away, another contingent of Burning Braziers aimed their torches at the phantoms flying down at them like owls diving at mice. Perhaps, their attention locked on the imminent threat, they hadn't even noticed what had just happened to

their fellows. The red metal rods exploded and they perished instantly, slain by the same force to which they'd consecrated their existences.

Bareris suspected that with the priests lost, the battle was almost certainly lost. All he and his comrades could do was attempt to destroy as many of the enemy as possible before the creatures slaughtered them in their turn.

So he struck blow after blow, splintering skeletons and hacking shambling cadavers to pieces, until Aoth and Brightwing plunged to earth in front of him. The griffon's talons impaled the ghoul Bareris had been about to attack, and her weight crushed the false life out of it.

When he saw the war mage, Bareris realized that in all probability, he wasn't the only one who'd lost a woman he loved. "Chathi?" he asked.

Aoth scowled. "Never mind that. Get on."

"What—"

"Do it!"

Bareris clambered up behind the legionnaire. Brightwing instantly leaped back into the air, nearly unseating him. Mirror floated upward to soar alongside his living comrades.

"After the priests burned to death," said Aoth, "Tharchion Damos waved me down. I'm a galloper now, a messenger. Nobody on the ground could push through this press, but Brightwing can carry me over it."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"I can reach the folk I need to reach, but it's hard to make them hear me over all the noise unless I waste time setting

down, but you're a bard with magic in your voice. They'll hear you."

"Fine. Just tell me what to say."

Bareris soon discovered that hurtling back and forth above the battle was no less perilous than fighting on the ground. Skeletal archers loosed shafts at them, and necromancers hurled

chilling blasts of shadow. Wraiths soared to intercept them. Brightwing veered, swooped, and climbed, dodging the attacks. Aoth struck back with darts of amber light evoked from the head of his lance. Bareris and Mirror slashed at any foe that flew within reach of their blades.

Meanwhile, they delivered the tharchion's orders: The legionnaires must protect the surviving priests—servants of gods other than Kossuth, mostly, who'd served with the armies of Pyarados and Thazalhar since before the Burning Braziers arrived to lend their strength—and wizards at all costs. Difficult though it would be, the soldiers also needed to push forward to make room for the rest of their comrades to enter the fortress. Archers were to find their way to upper-story windows and rooftops, where they could target the enemy without the ranks of their own comrades obscuring their lines of sight. Thayans with mystical capabilities, be they arcane, deity-granted, or arising simply from the possession of an enchanted weapon, must concentrate their efforts on the specters and any other enemy essentially immune to common steel.

To Bareris's surprise, their efforts made a difference. The startling destruction of the fire priests had thrown the army into confusion, if not to the brink of panic and collapse, but Milsantos's commands were sound. By degrees, they reestablished order and valid tactics. Even more importantly, perhaps, they rallied the legionnaires by reminding them that a highly competent war leader was still directing the assault. The battle wasn't over yet.

Bareris, though, still believed it was nearly over. His

comrades, humans and screaming blood ores alike, were fighting like devils, but they were also steadily dying, in some cases to rise mere moments later and join the enemy host.

The gallopers finished delivering Milsantos's current list of orders and flew back for a new one. Broadsword in hand, the gilt

runes on his plate armor and kite shield glowing, affording him the benefit of their enchantments, the aged warrior had stationed himself atop a portion of the surviving walls, the better to oversee the battle. Nymia had joined him on his perch. Bareris winced to see both commanders occupying the same exposed position, but at least they had a fair number of guards and spellcasters clustered around to protect them, and there was little safety to be had anywhere in any case.

Brightwing furled her pinions and lit on the wall-walk, while Mirror simply hovered off to the side. Aoth saluted with a flourish of his lance and rattled off the messages from the officers on the ground.

His features grim inside his open helm, Milsantos acknowledged them with a brusque nod. "Based on what you've seen flying over the battle, what's your impression?"

"We're losing," said Aoth.

"Yes," said Milsantos, "I think so too."

"We could handle the ghouls and dread warriors," Nymia said. Slime caked her mace and weapon arm, proof that at some point, she'd needed to fight her way to the battlements. "It's the ghosts and such that are killing us, and they'd be powerless if the sun were shining." She gave one of the mages a glare.

The warlock spread hands stained and gritty with the liquids and powders he used to cast his spells. "Tharchion, we've tried our best to dispel the gloom."

"But the nighthaunt's magic is too strong," Bareris said.

"What if we kill the thing? Would that weaken the

enchantment?"

"It might," said the mage.

"Let's do it then."

Nymia sneered. "Obviously, we'd kill it if we could. It's what we came to do, but we lost sight of it just after the elemental broke the wall. It isn't fighting in the thick of the battle any more than Tharchion Daramos and I are."

"Then we draw it out," Milsantos said, "using ourselves as bait. You and I descend from these battlements, forsaking the wards the mages cast to protect us. We mount our horses, and with a relatively small band of followers, break through the ranks of the enemy. Then we charge toward the central keep as though in a final desperate, defiant attempt to challenge the power that holds it." He smiled crookedly. "You know, chivalry. The kind of idiocy that loses battles and gets warriors killed."

"As it would this time," Nymia said.

"Maybe yes, maybe no. We'll ride with our best fighters and battle mages. The wizards will enhance our capabilities with enchantment, and we'll hope that when the nighthaunt spies us looking vulnerable, cut off by virtue of our own stupidity from most of our followers, it will come to fight us itself. It's a demon, isn't it, or near enough. It must like killing with its own hands, and it must particularly hanker to slay us. Once it does, it's won.

"Of course," the old man continued, "even if it does reveal itself, it won't be alone, but we'll use every trick we know and every scroll and talisman we've hoarded over the years, and whatever else threatens us, we'll all do our utmost to strike it down."

Nymia shook her head. "Commit suicide if you like, but I won't join you."

"It needs to be both of us," Milsantos said, "to bait the trap as enticingly as possible. Consider that we're not likely to leave this place alive in any case. Would you rather stand before your god as victor or vanquished? Imagine, too, your

fate if you did escape but abandoned the zulkirs' legions to perish. The council would punish you in ways that would make you wish a nighthaunt had merely torn you apart."

"All right," Nymia sighed. "We'll do it, with Aoth and a goodly number of the other griffon riders flying overhead to fend off threats from the air."

"I'm coming," said Bareris, and to his relief, neither of the tharchions objected.

He then had to scramble to commandeer a destrier. He knew how to fight on horseback and assumed he'd be of more use doing so than clinging to Brightwing's rump.

Once in the saddle, he crooned to his new mount, a chestnut gelding, establishing a rapport and buttressing its courage. Meanwhile, Aoth delivered orders. Soldiers and spellcasters shifted about, positioning themselves for the action to come. Milsantos nodded to the aide riding beside him, and the young knight blew a signal on his horn. As one, bowmen shot whistling volleys of arrows into the mass of undead clogging one particular street. Wizards assailed the same creatures with blazes of flame and lightning, while the remaining priests hammered them with the palpable force of their faith.

The trumpetet sounded another call. The barrage ended. The men-at-arms holding the mouth of the street drew apart, clearing a path. Astride a black charger, its barding aglow with some of the same golden sigils adorning his plate, Milsantos dropped his lance into fighting position. Others in the company he'd assembled did the same, then they all charged up the corridor.

The barrage just concluded had thinned out the undead blocking the way and left the survivors reeling. The charge slammed into the creatures, and spears punched through their bodies. The horses knocked zombies and skeletons down, and their pounding hooves pulped and shattered them.

Still, foes remained, and undaunted by the annihilation of so

many of their fellows, they attempted to drag the riders and their mounts down. No lancer—despite his career as a mercenary, he'd never had the opportunity to master that particular weapon—Bareris slashed at his decaying, skull-faced assailants with his sword and urged his horse onward. The riders had to keep moving or their plan would fail almost before it had begun.

A ghoul slashed Bareris's horse's shoulder with its long, dirty claws, and the animal lurched off balance. Fearful that the virulence of the undead creature's touch had paralyzed his steed, the bard riposted with a head cut. The ghoul fell, and not crippled after all, the destrier regained its footing and raced onward.

Overhead, griffons screeched, men shouted, and magic boomed and crackled. Plastered with writhing skin kites, a winged steed and its master crashed on a roof, tumbled down the pitch, and dropped in a heap in the street. Bareris looked to see if it was Aoth and Brightwing who'd fallen—it wasn't—but otherwise didn't even glance at the portion of the fight raging in the air. He didn't dare divert his attention from his own assailants.

He hacked a skeleton's skull off the top of its spine, felt more than saw a lunging shadow, and obliterated it with a thrust. Then, suddenly, no foes remained within reach of his blade. He peered about and saw that he and his companions had fought their way clear.

They galloped onward. Skillful enough to sound his instrument even astride a running horse, Milsantos's trumpeter blew more calls on his horn. His efforts were supposed to create the impression that the riders were signaling the bulk of the army they'd just left behind to enable the two forces to act in concert, to make the nighthaunt worry that the tharchions were well on the way to the culmination of some cunning strategy, even if it wasn't apparent what it was, and that their adversaries had better act swiftly to balk them.

In Bareris's judgment, it wasn't an entirely preposterous notion. Plainly their company could do some damage if left unopposed to maneuver and strike at the rear of the undead host, and even if the nighthaunt wasn't concerned about that, they could still hope their manifest vulnerability would draw it out into the open.

One of the griffon riders yelled, "There!"

Bareris looked up, saw the nighthaunt staring down at him from the battlements atop the gate of the central keep, and immediately comprehended why even a veteran war mage like Aoth feared the dead black, pale-eyed monstrosity. Though its mere presence didn't poison a man like Xingax's could—at least not at this distance—it nonetheless seemed the very embodiment of boundless power wed to unrelenting, all-encompassing hatred. A man could scarcely bear to look at it, and at the same time, transfixed with dread, he found it all but impossible to tear his gaze away. Wings ragged and peeling, body oozing slime, a larger and even more hideous creature stood beside the leader of the undead marauders, while luminous shades hovered in the air behind it, but in that first terrible moment, Bareris scarcely even registered their existence.

"Halt!" shouted Milsantos, and for the most part, the Thayan horsemen obeyed. They had no need to ride farther now that the nighthaunt had appeared, but two men, their nerve breaking, wheeled and fled back the way they'd come.

Tharchions, the nighthaunt said, his silent psychic voice beating at Bareris's mind like a bludgeon. My name is Ysval. You fight well but have no hope of winning. Yield and I'll spare you, not to continue precisely as you are, but you and your captains at least will retain your essential identities.

"No," Milsantos said. "The council of zulkirs ordered us to destroy you, and that's what we intend to do."

I hoped you'd answer thusly, Ysval said.

He lashed his wings and hurtled down into the midst of his foes. Trained war-horses screamed and shied. The

nighthaunt tore one animal's head off with a swipe of his talons. Blood sprayed from the end of the shredded neck. The wraiths followed their captain toward their mortal foes. In response, some of the battle mages aimed wands or rattled off incantations. Priests brandished the symbols of their faiths

and cried the names of their gods. Flares of power, some visible, some not, flung some specters backward like leaves in a gale and seared others from existence.

Other spellcasters read the trigger phrases from scrolls. Walls of roaring fire and shimmering light sprang up around the horsemen, some at ground level, others floating in midair. Unfortunately, they weren't large and numerous enough to overlap and enclose the riders completely. Wraiths could and no doubt would slip through the gaps between barriers, but at least they'd no longer find it possible to overwhelm their opponents in a single onrushing, irresistible swarm.

In theory, that should leave the majority of the Thayans free to focus on Ysval and the relatively small number of lesser undead that had succeeded in closing before the magical barriers sprang into existence. No doubt recognizing that he'd blundered into a snare, the nighthaunt stopped lashing out with claw and tail and simply stood for a moment. Bareris surmised the creature was trying to shift himself to the safety of another level of existence, but nothing happened. Studying ancient texts, the enchanter had discovered that nighthaunts possessed that particular ability, and one of them had already cast a spell to keep him from exploiting it.

Ysval laughed. Well done, but it won't save you. I could kill the lot of you all by myself if necessary. He shook his fist and enormous hailstones hammered from the air, ringing on the armor of the foes in front of him.

Bareris sang a charm and urged his reluctant mount closer to Ysval. Then the horse thrashed and toppled. Bareris



kicked his feet from the stirrups, flung himself out of the saddle, and though he landed hard, just managed to keep the animal's weight from smashing down on top of his leg.

He scrambled to his feet and found himself facing Tammith across the steed's still-shuddering carcass.

Tammith felt as if she'd been split into two creatures. One had struggled with all her strength to turn away from Bareris, and if she couldn't flee the battle altogether at least kill other people instead. But the other, demonic and perverse, lusted to destroy him precisely because she'd loved him her whole life long, and that Tammith proved the stronger. Reveling in her newly acquired strength, she leaped from the rooftop where she'd been lurking, hoping to drop on a horseman as he rode by, rushed Bareris's mount, and bit a chunk of flesh from the underside of its neck, all before he even realized she was there. The charger fell, and she hoped he'd wind up stuck underneath it. If so, he'd be helpless. Easy prey.

But he threw himself clear, rose, and his eyes widened at the sight of her. She spat out the wad of gory horseflesh in her mouth, and that made his dear, handsome features twist. To her, with her divided psyche, his horror and grief were simultaneously excruciating and the funniest thing she'd ever seen.

"Are you still going to rescue me?" she asked, grinning.

"Yes," he said. "If it can be done, I'll do it. Just give me the chance. Don't make me hurt you."

"You're right," she said, "we mustn't fight. No matter what happens or what I've become, we mustn't hurt one another." She turned away from him, then instantly spun back around and leaped over the body of the horse.

Though she'd believed her deception persuasive, he was ready to receive her attack. Even so, her outstretched hands nearly grabbed him, but with a quickness that suggested he was employing his charm of speed, he sidestepped and slashed open her belly in almost the same place where he'd

wounded her before.

It hurt. Her guts started to slide through the rent, and doubling

over, she clutched at herself to hold them in. She swayed and fell onto her side.

This time, her pretense was evidently more convincing, for with a seasoned warrior's caution, Bareris then looked about, checking for any foes that might have crept up on him while he was busy with her. He believed her incapacitated, and why shouldn't he? The same sort of injury had neutralized her before.

But as Xingax had promised, she grew stronger every day, and as a result, she healed more rapidly. As soon as Bareris turned his head, she flowed to her feet and pounced at him.

Darts of golden light streaked down from overhead to stab into her body and make her falter. A deep male voice bellowed, "Behind you!" Bareris pivoted, and as she lunged, he extended his sword. She stopped just short of the point, sprang back, and started shifting back and forth, trying to confuse him and create an opening. Her predatory instincts instructed her in the proper way to feint and glide.

She wasn't fooling Bareris. He was too canny. She stood still, stared into his eyes, and tried to catch and crush his will, but that didn't work either. In fact, as soon as she made herself a stationary target, he ran at her and slashed her leg out from underneath her.

She fell. He stopped, turned, and hesitated. When he cut at her spine, she understood that he'd been trying to calculate how best to incapacitate her without destroying her. The slight pause gave her time to explode into a flock of bats.

With her consciousness divided among her various bodies, her humanity, or what remained of it, diffused along with it, and her need to kill Bareris became as pure as it was profound. She nearly succumbed to the urge to attack.

Nearly, but not quite, because though conscience and mercy were gone, memory remained, and she recalled that he

knew

a song to repel her in this guise. The bats flew several yards beyond his reach, swirled around one another, and coalesced into her womanly form once more. Her gashed leg throbbed as it took her weight but didn't give way. It was mostly healed already.

She hobbled toward him, trying to make it appear that her damaged limb was weaker than it was. He swung his sword into a low guard, and she noticed he wasn't singing. Just as he was too averse to fighting her to attempt a killing blow, so too was he neglecting to exploit his magic to best advantage.

In effect, that meant he'd already surrendered, for half measures couldn't save him. He was forcing her to murder him, to carry the resulting anguish through all the years of her endless undead existence, and his weakness and selfishness enraged her. She rushed him, his sword whirled up to threaten her, and she sprang at him anyway. The blade sheared into her side, but not enough to balk her. She slammed into him and carried him to the ground beneath her.

He gasped at the grip of her hands, cold and poisonous as any specter's touch. She could have leeched the life from him through that contact, but it wouldn't be as satisfying as draining his blood. Grappling, seeking to immobilize him, she opened her mouth to bite.

Bareris bellowed up into her face, and the thunderous sound seared her like a blast of fire. The world went black, and the sudden pain made her fumble her grip on her prey. Bareris shoved her and heaved himself out from underneath her.

Her sight began to restore itself after a moment, but the world remained a blurry, murky place. Still, she could make out Bareris scrambling to his feet, and her ruined face hanging in tatters from her skull, she jumped up to attack him once again.

He started chanting, and she laughed to hear it. Good, she

thought, you understand now. I'm not your beloved anymore.

I'm unclean, foul, and a slave to creatures fouler still. Please, please, destroy me if you can.

Meanwhile, she strove to strike, seize, and bite him as relentlessly as ever. Her throat burned with thirst.

His magic shrouded him in a misty vagueness that made it even more difficult for her half-blind eyes to pick him out. Still, she thought she'd judged where he was and sprang to grab hold of him.

He twisted away, avoiding her touch and leaving her floundering off balance for just an instant, time enough for his sword to leap at her neck. He bellowed a war cry as it sheared into her flesh and the bone underneath.

The world seemed to jump, and then she was on the ground, her right profile pressed against the dirt. She tried to rise but couldn't move. A long shape sprawled in front of her, and after a moment she recognized her own decapitated body.

The realization stunned her. It was so quick, she thought. After she and Bareris had fought so hard, so intimately, it didn't seem real that a single sudden cut had ended everything.

Looming over her like a giant, weeping, Bareris stepped between her and her body. He raised his sword over his head.

Mirror had a sense that he was supposed to engage Ysval if possible. Had someone so instructed him? He couldn't recall, but it seemed right. He strode toward the ink-black creature and the legionnaires who were fighting the thing already. A different warrior called out to him, but like so many things, the words simply failed to convey any meaning.

In another moment, however, a second voice, a soft, insinuating baritone, snagged him and pulled him around to face a man wrapped in a hooded gray mantle. The speaker was alive, but

even so, Mirror discerned without knowing or wondering how he knew that he was one of the enemy, likely a warlock who'd employed magic to avoid detection hitherto.

The mage swirled his hands through mystic passes. "You're undead," he crooned. "You belong on our side."

Mirror felt something changing inside him. Like any sensation, it was seductive, simply because it filled the emptiness, but even so, it seemed to him that he shouldn't allow it to continue. He sprang at the wizard, closing the distance with one prodigious leap, and drove his sword into the man's chest. To his vague disappointment, the weapon didn't cleave flesh or spill blood like a proper blade, but it did stop the mage's heart.

Mirror pivoted back toward Ysval and observed another horror battling its way toward the nighthaunt. Tall as an ogre, approximately female in form, the winged, leprous entity ravaged men and horses with her talons, shredding them and rotting their flesh with gangrene all in an instant. Even the liquid filth streaming from her open sores was dangerous, blistering any living creature it touched.

Mirror abruptly recalled that such abominations were known as angels of decay. He thought he might have encountered one on a different battleground but couldn't actually remember.

In any case, the sight of her sharpened his awareness of the battle as a whole, and he recognized what a mistake it would be to allow her and Ysval to stand together. The nighthaunt was already holding his own against the men-at-arms and battle mages assailing him from all sides. If such a formidable comrade came to his aid, the mortals would have no chance at all.

Fortunately, Mirror thought he could prevent that. Though he dimly recalled someone calling him "undead" at some point in the past, he didn't know if he truly was or not, but instinct whispered that neither the angel's infectious touch nor her slather of corrosive muck had any power to harm

him.

He flew at her and cut at her flank. Lightning-quick, she twisted out of the way and slashed with her talons. The first blow somehow streaked harmlessly through him, but he sensed that the next one would smash and tear, and he raised his arm to intercept it. As he started the motion, he wore no shield, but by the time he finished, there it was, round and affixed to his forearm by three sturdy straps. He knew it should have a coat-of-arms painted on the front and momentarily longed to view it.

He couldn't, of course, not while he was fighting. The angel's talons slammed into the targe and knocked him backward. Seeking to deny him time to recover, the creature lunged after him. Flinging spatters of slime, her flaking wing swatted him and sent him reeling farther.

He thought that would likely prove the end of him, but strangely, a simple exertion of will served to halt his flailing stagger and restore his equilibrium, as if he had no weight at all. He thrust at the angel, caught her by surprise, and his shadowy blade slid deep into her cankerous torso.

She cried out in her rasping voice, stumbled, but she didn't fall. He pulled his sword back, and they traded blows. Sometimes she evaded his strokes and sometimes they sheared into her, albeit without leaving a mark thereafter. At certain moments, her talons whizzed harmlessly through him, at others, his shield or plate deflected them, and occasionally, they slashed him. Then he experienced a shock that was less pain than an upheaval of the elements of his being. The aching hollow at his core yawned wide, threatening to swallow everything else.

It was difficult to tell how many times the angel needed to wound him before that would actually happen, just as it was hard to judge how badly he was hurting her. He truly had no idea who was winning until she suddenly pitched forward. Her corpse liquefied completely almost before it splashed facedown in the street.

Victory over such a formidable foe filled him with triumph, and intense emotion sharpened and deepened his thoughts. He sensed that he'd fought many times, and war remained his proper occupation. It might not ever make him remember, but at least while embroiled in the midst of it he comprehended there was something he'd forgotten.

He flew at Ysval.

Bareris's hand was steady as he hacked open Tammith's severed head to cut the brain within, then he slid his enchanted blade into her heart. He felt as numb and empty of feeling as any of the zombies he'd faced this day.

As soon as he finished, however, he started to shake, and anguish and self-loathing welled up inside him.

At the end, he'd had no choice but to slay Tammith. Otherwise, she would certainly have killed him, and as it turned out, it simply hadn't been in him to surrender to that.

He'd likewise deemed it necessary to desecrate Tammith's remains, lest she rise to fight anew. Yet he now understood that such an act, however essential, could be unbearable and unforgivable as well.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to run his sword into his own heart.

But that would mean abandoning the fight to defeat Xingax, Ysval, and the necromancers, and that was unacceptable. The wretches had to be punished. They had to lose and suffer and die.

Singing a pledge of vengeance, he cast about to see where Ysval was.

Aoth thrust the point of his lance into a shadow. The phantom frayed into tatters of darkness.

The ghosts were coming faster now, more and more of them finding their way through the gaps in the sheets of flame and planes of radiance the wizards had conjured to hold them back. Aoth and his fellow griffon riders fought doggedly to keep the spirits in the air from flying down to aid their commander.

He looked around and realized that at last the battle had granted him and Brightwing a moment to catch their breaths. No new foes had yet appeared in their immediate vicinity. It gave him a chance to peer down and assess what was happening on the ground.

Ysval clawed. Milsantos caught the blow on his shield, but the impact knocked him out of the saddle. The nighthaunt virtually tore the old man's war-horse out of his way as if it were a curtain and lunged after him, but in so doing, the undead captain exposed his flank to Bareris, who, chanting, slashed the creature's night black body with his sword. As did Mirror, flitting around to attack from behind. Ysval faltered, and Milsantos clambered to his feet.

Ysval pivoted and drove his talons into Mirror's chest. The ghost's misty form writhed and boiled. Ysval raised his other hand for a follow-up blow. Bareris cut at him but failed to divert the nighthaunt from his fellow undead.

Then, however, a colossal spider, gnashing mandibles dripping venom, ring of eyes gleaming, materialized beside Ysval. One of Aoth's fellow battle wizards had evidently summoned it. The spider pounced on the shadowy entity. The serrated jaws ripped him.

Ysval tore the creature off him and smashed it down on its back. As it started to heave itself upright, he thrust out his hand at it, malign power shivered through the air, and the arachnid stopped moving.

But Mirror's form once more appeared as steady and stable as

it ever did, and as Ysval finished with the spider, Nymia rode by him and bashed him with her mace.

We're like a swarm of wasps attacking a man, Aoth thought. Individually, we're puny in comparison, but it's hard for him to defend himself against all of us at once.

Perhaps, his arrogance and manifest fury notwithstanding, Ysval also believed his foes might ultimately overwhelm him, for he brandished his fist, and ragged tendrils of



shadow blazed outward from his body. His opponents stumbled and reeled. He lashed out with claw and tail, flinging them backward, giving himself room to spread his wings and spring into the air.

No, thought Aoth, you don't get to break away and work your magic without interference. You have to stay on the ground where everyone can pound on you.

"Get him," he said, and Brightwing dived.

Ysval heard or sensed them coming and turned to face them. When he met the gaze of the nighthaunt's moon white eyes, Aoth felt a jolt of dread, and angry at his reaction, he promised himself it was the last time. One way or another, this filthy thing was never going to scare him again.

Then Brightwing froze. Thanks to their psychic bond, Aoth could tell his familiar was still alive and conscious. Indeed, she wasn't even wounded, but Ysval had somehow paralyzed her, and now she wasn't swooping but falling. The nighthaunt laughed.

Why shouldn't he? Now that the griffon couldn't shift her wings, her plummeting trajectory wouldn't take her and Aoth within reach of him.

Aoth charged his lance with all the power it could hold then hurled it like a javelin. The long, heavy weapon wasn't designed for use as a missile, but perhaps some god sharpened his eye and strengthened his arm, maybe Kossuth, avenging the treacherous murder of his Burning Braziers, because the spear plunged into Ysval's shoulder.

To how much effect, it was impossible to say, because Aoth and Brightwing fell past him an instant later. The mage started rattling off a counterspell that might, if poor Chathi's patron deity saw fit to grant a second boon, cleanse the griffon's clenched muscles of their affliction.

Unfortunately, Aoth didn't have time to finish. He and Brightwing slammed down hard on a rooftop, which crunched and buckled beneath them but didn't give way entirely.

The impact spiked pain up the length of his body, but rather to his surprise, he survived it, and Brightwing did too. He could only assume that, despite her paralysis, her wings had caught enough air to keep them from falling at maximum speed.

Some yards away, Ysval crashed onto the street with the lance still sticking out of his body. He immediately sought to scramble to his feet, so obviously neither the spear nor the fall had killed him, but as Aoth had hoped, the injury to his shoulder had at least deprived him of the use of his wings.

Evidently recovered from the stunning effect of the burst of shadow, Bareris and Mirror rushed Ysval and cut at him relentlessly. The nighthaunt managed one more snatch with his talons and a final strike with his tail then toppled onto his side and lay motionless.

Some part of Bareris realized Ysval was dead. Nonetheless, he couldn't stop hacking at the corpse, not until a phantom streaked across his field of vision and tore a knight from the saddle.

Bareris looked up. Having existed for their allotted span, the floating barriers had begun to wink out of existence, and the ghosts were rushing through the openings, swarming on the griffon riders like soft, gleaming leeches attacking a party of swimmers.

The plan indicated that as soon as Ysval died, someone who possessed the necessary magic was supposed to dispel the unnatural gloom enveloping the fortress. It didn't seem to be happening. Was any of that select group of spellcasters still alive? If so, immersed in the chaos of battle, struggling to fend off the foes assailing him, had he even perceived that the moment for action had arrived?

Bareris drew a deep breath and bellowed loudly as only a bard could. "Break the darkness! Now! Now! Now!" On the other side of the battlefield, Milsantos's trumpeter blew the call intended to communicate the same message.

For several heartbeats, it appeared no one heard, at least no

one with the power to respond in the appropriate manner. Then, however, the sky brightened from black to blue in an instant. Bareris flinched and squinted at the sudden blaze of sunlight that scoured the wraiths from the air.

He wasn't certain they'd all perished. Perhaps some endured as mere disembodied awareness or potential, like Mirror at his most ethereal, but even if so, they lacked the power to manifest until night returned.

Of course, the Keep of Thazar still harbored ghouls and animate corpses, creatures able to tolerate daylight even if it pained them, so the battle was far from over. Still, Bareris was now certain he and his allies were going to win. Considered as revenge, it wasn't enough. It could never be enough, but it was a start, and weary to the bone though he was, he strode back toward the breached wall and the muddled din of the fight still raging there in search of something else to kill. For some reason impervious to the purifying sun, Mirror fell into step beside him.

#### Chapter fourteen

17Ky thorn, the Year of Risen Elfkin

A.oth took a swallow of beer, belched, and said, "One nice thing about the undead: When they occupy a fortress, they don't drink up all the ale."

In truth, he had good reason to be glad of it. So many priests had died when Szass Tarn's torches exploded that after the battle, healing magic had been in short supply. As a captain and war mage, he hadn't had any difficulty or qualms about commandeering the services of a cleric to knit his broken bones and Brightwing's too, but bruises, however painful, were a different matter. Nymia and many other officers he'd known wouldn't have hesitated to order up a second dose of healing to ease them, but he couldn't, not when there were legionnaires likely to die for want of a priest's attention. He simply bore the discomfort as best he could, and alcohol helped, as it helped so many things in life.

Seated on the other side of the shabby little parlor that

comprised the greater portion of their billet, methodically honing a

dagger, Bareris raised his head and asked, "How soon, do you think, will we head up into the mountains?"

Aoth sighed. His new friend's response had nothing to do with what he himself had said, but at least he'd answered. Half the time, when someone spoke to him, he didn't.

"It's hard to say. You know as well as I do, an army needs time to put itself back in order after a big, hard fight, and when the tharchions are ready to attack this underground fortress you tell of, it might be easier to reach it through the portal in Delhumide."

"No." The dagger whispered against the whetstone. "The necromancers know an intruder found and used it already. I doubt it's there anymore."

"Well, you could be right." In actuality, Aoth wasn't certain Nymia and Milsantos would decide to go hunting "Xingax" and his cohorts by any route. The zulkirs hadn't ordered them to, a march over the Sunrise Mountains would be difficult, and who knew if Bareris could even find the wizards' lair again? But he had a hunch the bard wasn't ready to hear that.

Bareris glowered. "You sound as if you don't even want to go-

"I won't want to go anywhere for the next couple of days. You wouldn't either, if you'd come out of the battle banged up like me. Anyway, I'm a legionnaire. I go where my tharchion sends me."

"What about Chathi?"

"I liked her. I miss her, but it won't keep me from living the rest of my life. She wouldn't want that. I doubt your Tammith would have wanted it for you, either."

"You don't understand. You can't. You were only with Chathi a short time. My whole life centered on Tammith."

"It's grand to love and be loved, but a man needs to stand at the center of his own life."

"I only wanted to make her happy, yet I failed her in everything." Bareris laughed. "By the Harp, that's a mild way of putting it, isn't it? Failed her. I destroyed her."

"A priest would say you set her soul free. Certainly, you did everything you could for her. It's a miracle you were even able to track her."

"If I'd never left Bezantur—"

"And if I'd figured out the torches were dangerous a few breaths sooner, Chathi might still be alive. Whenever things go wrong, you can always find an if, but what's the point of brooding over it? You're only torturing yourself."

Bareris stood up and reached for his sword belt, which hung on a peg on the wall with Aoth's lance leaning beside it. "I'm going for a walk."

"My friend, if I've said anything to offend you, I'm sorry."

Bareris shook his head. "It isn't that. It's just ..." He slid the newly sharpened knife into its sheath then buckled on his weapons. "I just need to be alone."

Malark was as tired as he could recall ever being, even during the first months of his monastic training, and accordingly eager to reach his destination. Even so, he brought his flying horse down to the trail for the final leg of the journey up the valley. If the undead were still in possession of the Keep of Thazar, he'd be at least slightly less conspicuous approaching at ground level, and if the legionnaires had succeeded in retaking the place, he didn't want them mistaking him for a wraith. By now, they were likely wary of most anything that flew.

His steed snorted, expressing its displeasure at descending. When first created, it hadn't displayed emotion, nor had its black coat felt so much like actual horsehair. Malark wondered

if, over time, simply by virtue of being perceived and employed, an illusory creature could become more real.

The question intrigued him, but now was not the time to ponder it. He'd do better to focus his attention on his

surroundings, lest some skeleton or dread warrior notice him before he spotted it.

He crested a rise and the castle came into view, with a portion of the curtain wall demolished and an army, or the overflow of one, camped around it. He smiled, for the force was plainly composed of living men and ores. Minute with distance though they were, he could see them moving freely about in the sunlight, and downwind, he could smell their cook fires and latrines. In addition to which, the banners of Thay, Pyarados, and Thazalhar flew from spires inside the fortress.

He cantered on into the encampment, where, it seemed to him, a general air of lethargic exhaustion prevailed. Still, it wasn't long before someone realized he was a stranger and came to ask his business.

"I'm an emissary from Tharchion Flass," he answered, "and I need to see Nymia Focar and Milsantos Daramos immediately."

Nymia had heard reports of Dmitra Flass's outlander lieutenant but had never met him before, so she studied him curiously. Despite what had evidently been a wearisome journey, he kneeled without any show of stiffness or soreness, and the regard of his striking green eyes bespoke intellect and self-possession. Her initial impression was that he appeared as competent as his reputation indicated.

"Rise," said Milsantos, "and tell us your business."

He and Nymia had taken a room near the top of the central keep to serve as their command center, and weather permitting, threw open the casements to admit fresh air and illumination. This afternoon the old man sat in a chair near one of the west windows, and the golden sigils on his breastplate—Nymia wondered fleetingly if, when on campaign, he ever dispensed entirely with the weight, heat, and general discomfort of plate armor—gleamed in a shaft of sunlight.

"Thank you," said Malark. "I understand you've been busy

retaking the valley and castle. May I ask how much you know about what's been happening elsewhere in Thay?"

"Szass Tam," said Milsantos, "asked his fellow zulkirs to make him regent, but they declined."

Malark smiled. "I'm glad to find you so well informed. It will save us at least a little time, and we don't have much to spare, but I imagine there are facts you haven't had the opportunity to learn. Szass Tam manipulated recent events to increase the likelihood of the other zulkirs acceding to his request. Among other machinations, he murdered Druxus Rhym and Aznar Thrul, tampered with the transmuters' election, betrayed a Thayan army to the Rashemi, and fomented riots in the major cities. All deeds that furthered his plan in one way or another."

No, Nymia thought, I don't want to hear this. She and Milsantos had defeated the undead marauders Szass Tam's followers had created as the lich himself had charged her to do, even though it meant taking necromancers captive and destroying their dread-warrior servants. But in the aftermath, everything had seemed to be all right. Though Szass Tam almost certainly knew what the armies of Pyarados and Thazalhar had accomplished, he hadn't come rushing to exact retribution. She'd dared to hope she might actually emerge from this mad, paradoxical situation unscathed.

Yet here was the small man with the spot on his chin telling her secrets she was better off not knowing and almost certainly

with the intent of enmeshing her in new dangers and ambiguities. She could have joyfully bashed in his skull with her mace and chunked the corpse out one of the casements. Frowning, Milsantos fingered a rune on his armor. "We didn't know all that, but it doesn't surprise me, because we have discovered that Red Wizards of Necromancy created and directed the raiders we've been fighting."

Nymia wanted to bash him too. Why did you tell him that?

she thought. It's bad enough that we know, worse to prattle about it to one of Dmitra's agents.

"That makes sense," said Malark. "Initially, it gave him another opportunity to play the savior, and after his fellow zulkirs rejected his proposal, it likewise served the next phase of his scheme."

"You speak," said Milsantos, "as if you know what that is."

"I do," said Malark. "After the vote, when it became clear Szass Tam was still playing his games, Tharchion Flass gave me the task of figuring out what his new purpose is. In time, it occurred to me that in the wake of their botched invasion of Rashemen, he likely commands the complete loyalty of Tharchions Kren and Odesseiron, and that reflection led to a rather alarming supposition. Employing an unnaturally swift steed, I rode far to learn if it could possibly be true. It is. I discovered the legions of Gauros and Surthay, newly augmented by a massive infusion of undead warriors, marching south."

"You're telling us," Milsantos said, "that since his fellow zulkirs refused to vote Szass Tam a throne, he means to seize it by force of arms."

"Yes, and now your army, which includes the Burning Braziers, is on the wrong side of the realm to oppose him."

Milsantos rose and gestured to a map of Thay spread on one of the trestles tables. "Show me the northerners' route."

Malark advanced to the table, and nerves taut as bowstrings,

Nymia reluctantly stood and approached for a better look as well.

Using his fingertip, the outlander traced a path along the vellum chart. "As best I can reconstruct it, they swung west through the sparsely inhabited part of Eltabbar and have now headed south into Lapendrar."

Milsantos nodded. "In their place, I'd do the same. Pyras Autorian is loyal to Szass Tam, but it would still be arduous to drag an army up the Second Escarpment, across the



peaks of the Thaymount, then down the cliffs once more. You'd be seen, too, by someone hostile to your intentions. Too many Red Wizards have estates in the highlands, and on the south half of the plateau, the fiefs and towns are packed in too close for a host to sneak through."

"That's true," Nymia said, "but surely someone noticed them marching through Lapendrar. Hezass Nymar may not have a strong enough army to oppose them, but why didn't he warn the council of their coming? Why did one of Dmitra's agents have to venture forth and discover this for himself?"

"I can hazard a guess," said Malark. "Hezass Nymar dances to Szass Tarn's piping as well, though maybe not to the point of lending his own relatively meager forces to the lich's scheme. That I simply couldn't tell, and Szass Tam may not want them anyway. Someone has to hold the Aglarondan border. But at least to the extent of granting free passage to Tharchions Odesseiron and Kren and keeping their progress a secret." He smiled. "The priest's probably glad he chose to govern from Escalant instead of residing in Lapendrar proper. If the necromancers fail, he can claim afterward that he didn't know what was going on."

Milsantos grunted. "If we're going to speculate, let's do it about something important. Where are Kren and Odesseiron headed? It can't be the capital, or they would have circled east instead of west. It has to be Bezantur. Take it and you pretty much control the whole south of the realm and all access to the

sea. You've taken a giant step toward winning your war almost before it's begun."

"Tharchion Flass agrees with you," said Malark, "particularly since the city and all Priador are in a vulnerable condition. Their tharchion is dead and I'm informed that now the commander of his legion and city guard is too. Apparently the Shadowmasters assassinated him. Szass Tam must have hired them."

"What I want to know," Nymia said, "is why you, a servant of

Dmitra Flass, have ridden all the way to the eastern edge of Thay to tell us these things. The last I heard, she too was Szass Tarn's faithful follower."

"Until recently, yes. She's since decided the prudent course is to cast her lot with six zulkirs rather than one."

"Still," said Milsantos, "that doesn't quite explain what you're doing here."

"If Priador can't defend itself, someone else has to."

"Meaning us?" Nymia asked. "You said it yourself: We're on the wrong side of the country."

"But you're prepared to march and fight, seeing as how you've been doing it for tendays already. Your men know how to combat the undead. You have the most formidable war priests in Thay at your disposal."

"In contrast, many another legion is still nestled in the garrison it's occupied more or less peacefully ever since the new trade policy began. After all Szass Tam has done to win their regard, many a soldier reveres or fears him and is reluctant to take up arms against him. Indeed, at this point, it's an open question just how many tharchions will stand with the council."

Milsantos snorted. "Your argument isn't as strong as you imagine. We fought hard to retake this fortress. We'd benefit greatly from a few more days of rest. On top of which, the fire priests are dead. The arms Szass Tam furnished turned against them."

Malark smiled in apparent admiration. "Thus depriving us of perhaps our most potent weapon against specters and the like."

"Still," the old man said, "it may be that you've come to the right people. Let's assume that in time the council can field a sufficient force to oppose the northerners. The immediate task, then, is to slow down the enemy advance and keep them from reaching Bezantur before that happens. Nymia, your griffon riders have the mobility and skills required."

"Damn it!" Nymia exploded, then caught herself. It was

neither dignified nor prudent for two tharchions to argue in front of an inferior, particularly one who'd no doubt report the discussion word for word to one of their compatriots.

"Messenger, wait outside."

"Of course." Malark bowed, withdrew, and closed the door behind him

"I take it," Milsantos said, "that you don't care for my suggestion."

"How dare you assume," she gritted, "without a word of discussion between us, that I have any intention of fighting Szass Tam?"

"Ah," he said. "Perhaps that was presumptuous of me, and I apologize, but I think Dmitra Flass's notion is sound: Six zulkirs are stronger than one."

"Even when the one is Szass Tam?"

"Well, we can hope so."

"Even when we know for certain he already controls Gauros, Surthay, High Thay, and Lapendrar, and we don't know if any other tharchions except Dmitra—assuming we can even trust that duplicitous slut—mean to oppose him? What if we march against him, and it turns out we're the only ones?"

Milsantos smiled. "It will be inconvenient to say the least. Still, we'll have the other six zulkirs and the orders of wizardry they command."

"Until some of them deem it advantageous to switch sides. You know what they're like."

"Yes. I do. So what's your thought?"

"It's not as if the outlander brought us actual orders from the council. Despite the airs she puts on, Dmitra is our peer, not our superior."

"True. Apparently she begrudged the time it would have taken to palaver with the zulkirs."

"That means we aren't obligated to do anything. We can stay put here in the east and let everybody else slaughter one another in Priador."

Milsantos pulled a wry face. "It's tempting. You and I have

survived a long while by keeping our noses out of the zulkirs' squabbles, but I fear it's not possible anymore. The old rivalries have flared into actual war, and if you don't choose a side, both will regard you as an enemy."

"Let's say you're right. In that case, I want to back the winning side. Just how certain are you it will be the council?"

"To be honest, not certain at all, but I'm willing to play my hunch. In addition to which, I've seen quite a bit of the undead of late, enough to sicken me. I don't want a lich as sole ruler of my homeland."

Nymia sighed. "Nor do I. He unleashed his pet horrors on my tharch, ordered me to dispose of them, then betrayed and crippled our army at the worst possible moment. At this point, I hate and mistrust him too much to support him."

"We're agreed, then."

"Yes, curse you. I can have the Griffon Legion in the air before dusk, but it's going to be a nightmare getting the rest of the army ready for a forced march. We'll be lucky if the wretches don't mutiny." A thought struck her. "We're still holding all those necromancers prisoner. If we try to take them with us, they'll slow us down, and if we leave them behind, lightly guarded,

they're apt to escape despite their bonds and gags." "Then we'll have to kill them."

She ran her hand over her scalp. "Just kill a band of Red Wizards."

Milsantos grinned. "Don't tell me you've never felt the urge."

Squinting, Aoth scrutinized the mountainsides, but it was Brightwing who spotted the would-be travelers and pointed them out to him. Sword swinging at his side, bow slung across his back, Bareris was climbing a narrow, rocky trail. Diminished by sunlight and the absence of combat to the merest suggestion of murk, Mirror flowed along behind him.

Brightwing furled her wings, swooped, and landed in front of them, effectively blocking the path, though that wasn't Aoth's precise intention. At Bareris's back on the valley floor,

small as a dollhouse with distance, the Keep of Thazar and the surrounding encampment bustled with activity occasioned by the impending departure. The sight reminded Aoth of an anthill.

"I have men to oversee," he said, "and my own packing to attend to. I don't have time to chase you."

Bareris shrugged. "Then you shouldn't have."

"Should I let you throw your life away? As soon as I realized your belongings were gone, I guessed what you intended, and it's crazy. Even if you can find it again, you can't attack a necromancers' stronghold by yourself."

"I'm not by myself. Mirror decided to stick with me."

"It's still crazy."

"My quarrel is with Xingax and his confederates. If you legionnaires no longer mean to go after them, that's my bad luck, but it doesn't change what I need to do."

"I understand why you want to destroy Xingax, but you should save your fiercest hatred for Szass Tam. He's the one who bears ultimate responsibility for Tammith's transformation. Xingax was simply carrying out his orders."

Bareris's mouth tightened. "I suppose that's true."

"Then come west with the army, idiot! If you want to punish Szass Tam in the only way that folk like us have any hope of hurting him, the time to do it is now. If we don't keep him from taking Bezantur, there'll be no stopping him later. You can hunt down Xingax another day."

Bareris stood pondering for a heartbeat or two then said, "All right. Under one condition."

Aoth snorted. "I go out of my way to keep a lunatic from committing suicide, and he wants to bargain with me. What is it you want?"

"A griffon. Surely there's at least one that lost its master in the battle. Let me fly west with you." "Have you ever ridden a griffon?"

"No, but you can teach me, and I can use song to establish a bond with my steed. You've seen me do it before."

Now it was Aoth's turn to consider. Bareris—and Mirror—could prove invaluable in the actions to come, but those same skirmishes would be perilous for a novice rider.

"Please," Bareris said. "A moment ago, you called me a madman. I know you were joking, but sometimes I truly do feel as if my mind is going to break. It's not quite as bad when I'm striking blows against those who corrupted Tammith, and I'll fare better fighting alongside you than trudging for days merely hoping for a battle at the end of the trek."

"Very well," said Aoth. "We'll find a masterless griffon and see if you can charm it."

"Which is more," Brightwing said, "than you ever did for me."

## Chapter fifteen

22-27 Kythorn, the Year of Risen El/kin

The road to Priador ran roughly parallel to the First Escarpment, and the legions of the north straggled along it for miles. Bareris knew he and his comrades had no choice but to leave the body of the enemy host unmolested, at least while the sun burned in the sky. They didn't dare risk attacking such a superior force.

Outriders, however, were a different matter, and when an army lost those, it was reduced to creeping blind. Accordingly, the Griffon Legion, or what remained of it after the campaign through Pyarados and up the Pass of Thazar, had divided into smaller bands to hunt enemy scouts.

Aoth whistled and pointed with his lance. Following the gesture, Bareris saw the horsemen on the plain. The griffon riders dived, Bareris's eager mount furling its wings before he even gave the signal.

The northerners spotted them descending. A couple fled, perhaps because their horses panicked. The rest, evidently realizing

they couldn't outrun griffons, scrambled to ready their bows. An arrow streaked upward, and Bareris's steed veered to

dodge it. He was slow shifting his weight to facilitate the maneuver, and the griffon screeched in annoyance.

The shaft still missed them, though, and an instant later, the griffon plunged down atop the archer and his piebald horse, driving its claws into their bodies and smashing them to the ground.

Bareris cast about. On all sides, griffons, the warriors on their backs essentially superfluous, shredded their shrieking targets with beak and talon. They hadn't gotten all the outriders, though. A necromancer with a scarlet robe peeking out from under his cloak howled words of power and swept his arms through mystic passes. His hands left smears of darkness on the air.

Bareris shouted at him. Striking hard as a hammer, the sound knocked the Red Wizard out of the saddle and ruined his spell-casting. Brightwing sprang, and Aoth thrust his lance into the warlock's chest.

"We need to catch the ones who ran," said Aoth.

Bareris bumped his mount's flanks with his heels, and the griffon lashed its wings and leaped into the air. They raced in pursuit of the surviving scouts then saw there was no need to hurry. A shadow in the sunlight, eyes and other features barely discernible in his smear of a face, Mirror stood over the bodies of the northerners and their horses.

Bareris realized he ought to strip the corpses. Riding his flying steed, Malark Springhill had accompanied the griffon riders west, and though he'd eventually split off to attend to some project of his own, he'd first urged them to obtain the trappings of warriors from Gauros and Surthay whenever possible. These should do nicely. Thanks to the way Mirror's spectral sword dispatched its victims, they weren't even bloody or torn.

Malark cleared his throat. It seemed a gentler away of announcing his presence than abruptly casting his reflection into a lady's mirror.

It still startled her, though. Seated at her dressing table, one

bright blue eye painted, the other not and therefore looking smaller than its mate, Nephis Septet lurched around, then sighed and pressed a hand to her bosom when she saw who'd interrupted her at her toilet.

"Someday," she said, "you must tell me how you sneak in here without the servants knowing."

He waved his hand to indicate the glittering gold-and-sapphire jewelry she'd laid out for herself. "That's a lot of finery, considering that the autharch is otherwise engaged." She smiled. "His fickleness doesn't mean I have to be lonely."

Charmed despite himself as usual by her beauty and brazenness, Malark smiled back. "You play a dangerous game, Saer."

"As opposed to spying for you and Dmitra Flass?" Nephis turned back to the mirror and brushed blue pigment across the remaining eyelid. "From time to time, I need the touch of a young man, and I can handle Ramas. That's what makes me valuable, isn't it?"

"In fact, it makes you important. I assume you've kept abreast of recent events, the murders of two zulkirs, Szass Tarn's failed bid for a regency, and all the rest of it, but what you don't know is that the lich is marching legions south to gain himself a throne by force of arms. Their intended route leads through Anhaurz on the way to Bezantur."

She twisted back around. "You aren't serious."

"Yes, I am. The question is, how fast will His Omnipotence's host cover the distance? Fast enough to reach the coast all but

unopposed, or slowly enough for his rivals to field an adequate force to intercept him?"

"The new bridge," she said.

Malark nodded. "Very good. If the autharch allows it to stand, Szass Tarn's warriors can cross the Lapendrarr quickly. If he knocks it down, they'll still get across eventually, but it will cost them precious time. From what you've told me



of Ramas Ankhalab, I assume that once he learns of the northerners' approach, his inclination will be to demolish the span."

"Yes," Nephis said. "The fool long ago gave his loyalty to Aznar Thrul and his faction and hasn't wavered since, but don't worry. He may spend the occasional night with another trollop—and thank Sune for that, or when would I scratch my own itches?—but he's still besotted with me. I can persuade him to do whatever I want."

Malark hesitated for a heartbeat. "I haven't instructed you to take any particular action as of yet."

She snorted. "Did you think you had to? Szass Tam saved my father's life and restored his honor. He helped my brother gain entry to the order of Necromancy and shielded So-Kehur when the other apprentices wanted to hurt him. I'd do anything to help him."

He sighed. "I knew you'd say that." And it was a pity Szass Tam and Dmitra Flass no longer shared a common purpose. "I'll say farewell then. Just be ready to counsel the autharch when he receives word of the northern army."

She pouted. "Must you go so soon? Why not linger a while and help me scratch my itches?"

"I wish I could, but I have another message to deliver. Good-bye, my friend."

He crept back to her music room with its harp and lutes, then climbed out a window and down the wall. He slipped into a shadowy bower where he could stand and ponder unobserved.

The note he carried inside his tunic read: Milord Autharch, Your mistress Lady Nephis is untrue. She intends a tryst with a lover in the Camelian Suite this very night. She employs a talisman of invisibility to keep such assignations, so those who go to catch her in the act should deploy the appropriate countermagic.

If the lord of the city was as jealous and choleric as Nephis had always claimed, the message should serve to end her

influence over him for good and all. The only question was how to deliver it without being noticed. Fortunately, such problems rarely stymied Malark for long, and after a few more breaths, the solution came to him.

The inn stood midway between two tax stations. Aoth suspected the proprietor had liked it that way, liked not having a publican looking over his shoulder every time he rented bed space or sold a mug of ale.

Cowering before armed intruders in the caravanserai's common room, doing his inadequate best to shield his wife and three children with his pudgy body, he didn't look as if he liked it anymore. To all appearances, he would have given almost anything for a garrison of legionnaire protectors close at hand.

The family's manifest terror gave Aoth a pang of guilt, for after all, they weren't enemy warriors and had nothing to do with Szass Tam and his ambitions. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But war was made of such injustices.

"You have to clear out," he said, "and stay gone for a while."

The innkeeper, whose round, dark face seemed made for jollity rather than dread, swallowed. "Sir, please, I don't understand. This place is our home, and our living, too. It's all we have."

A griffon rider lifted his sword and stepped forward. "Fine, imbecile, you had your chance."

"Halt!" Aoth snapped, and then, when the soldier obeyed, returned his attention to the innkeeper. "You see how it is. You can take your coin with you, and anything else you can carry, but you must leave, and keep away till the end of the summer anyway. Believe me, you'll be safer that way."

The innkeeper's wife whispered in his ear, and then he said, "All right. We'll get our things."

"Just be quick about it," Aoth replied.

They were, and before long, they slunk out into the pounding rain that was almost unheard of in Thay, except

for late at night. Aoth assumed the council's weather wizards were responsible. It was yet another ploy to slow the northerners' advance, in part by turning Lapendrar's roads to muck.

Unfortunately, the rain also made for cold flying with diminished visibility, but the Griffon Legion would simply have to cope. Aoth turned to his men and said, "Let's get to it. Poison the beer barrels, and the well, too."

The warrior who'd threatened the innkeeper cocked his head. "You don't think finding the inn deserted will make the bastards suspicious?"

"Common folk often flee the approach of an army," Aoth replied. "If it makes the northerners leery enough to refrain from pilfering an unattended keg of ale, they're not like any soldiers I ever knew."

Dmitra surveyed the zulkirs seated around the table. It seemed to her that every face betrayed worry, no matter how the mage lords tried to mask it, and why not? They all had plenty to worry about.

"Your Omnipotences," she said, "thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"You should thank us," Samas Kul said, round face and fat neck a mottled red, "for by the Golden Coin, I don't know why I came. Some of us listened to you before, and as a result we're at war with Szass Tam!"

"Whereas if we hadn't heeded," Lallara snapped, waspish as ever, "the lich would be king already."

"That might be better than the alternative."

"No," said Nevron, glowering and smelling of sulfur, "it's not. I will never bend my knee to Szass Tam. I'd sooner drown the entire realm in hellfire."

Yaphyll's lips quirked into an impish smile. "It would be nice if we could chart a middle course. A tactic that avoids both surrender and ash."

"Your loyal servants in the Griffon Legion," Dmitra said, "are doing their best to hinder Szass Tarn's advance."

Unfortunately, a number of other companies are dawdling when they should be rushing to prepare for war. In some cases, they fear to take sides in a quarrel among zulkirs. In others, they're contemplating fighting for the lich.

"You have similar problems among the nobles and commoners," she continued. "Many are loath to exert themselves or make any sacrifices to assist the defense. Some merely await the opportunity to work against you as spies and saboteurs."

"We already knew Szass Tam did an exemplary job of endearing himself to the masses," Nevron growled. "Do you have a remedy?"

"I hope so, Your Omnipotence," Dmitra replied. "You six must forsake the seeming security of your castles and speak directly with lesser folk: the captains, the lords, and whomever."

Nevron glared at her. "You mean plead for their help?"

"Of course not. You are their masters, now and forever. The problem is, so is Szass Tam. You need to loom as large in their thoughts as he does, so command them as always, but do it in person. Don't count on them to obey your deputies with the same diligence and alacrity they'd show to you."

Samas Kul snorted. "I don't have the proper physique for chasing frantically about the realm."

"Perhaps you should consider turning into something leaner," Yaphyll replied. "That's what transmutation's all about, or so I'm told."

"In truth, Your Omnipotence," Dmitra said, "I didn't envision you doing a great deal of traveling. With an army marching against it, its tharchion and the commander of its legions assassinated, and the Shadowmasters still lurking about to hinder efforts at defense, nowhere in the realm needs more sorting out than Bezantur. You're the zulkir who lives there and heads up the guild that made the city rich. You can set matters right if anyone can, but not by hiding behind fortress walls."

"Walls have their uses," Lauzoril said in his usual prissy, tepid manner. "Szass Tam or his proxies have murdered two zulkirs already. Now you propose that the rest of us expose ourselves unnecessarily."

"Understand," said Mythrellan, her body patterned in brown and tan diamonds like snakeskin, "we have reason to fear traitors even within the ranks of our own orders. But I don't suppose I have to explain that to you."

"I infer," Dmitra said, "you're alluding to the fact that though I'm an illusionist, for a long while I gave my greatest loyalty to Szass Tam instead of your exalted self. What can I say, except that I recall a time when you too were pleased to have him as an ally."

Yaphyll chortled. "As were Lallara, Samas, and I, so let's forgo deploring old miscalculations and address current needs, to which end I'll say I believe Dmitra Flass is right. Whatever our

concerns about our personal safety, we need to take the southern tharchs in hand while we still can."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," Dmitra said, "for I have even more to recommend."

Samas Kul snorted. "What else can there be?"

"You're all used to Szass Tam working through agents and subordinates. As you do. As lords everywhere do. But I know him, and I promise you that when his army undertakes a major battle, he'll fight alongside his vassals. Obviously, his wizardry will all but guarantee a victory—unless we have archmages fighting on our side, too."

The zulkirs exchanged glances. Dmitra felt as if she could read their thoughts. None was especially eager to risk himself on a battlefield, where, if Lady Luck turned against him, even the most formidable spellcaster could fall. Their underlings were supposed to face such hazards for them. But chiefly they all flinched from the prospect of a duel of spells with Szass Tam. The lich was their superior, and whether or not any of them would ever concede it aloud,

they knew it.

The moment stretched on until Lallara suddenly banged her fist on the table. "Damn us for cowards! It's six against one, isn't it?"

Yaphyll grinned. "It is, and I think that if we're sensible, we must either fight as hard as we can or flee into exile. I'm not disposed to the latter. I just refurnished the south wing of my palace."

"Fine," Samas Kul spat. "I'll tend to Bezantur and all the rest of it, but it's a bitter jest that I finally rise to be a zulkir, and then, instantly, everything turns to dung."

Dmitra could see they were all of one mind, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her masters cared for nothing but their own self-interest, which meant their brittle accord could fracture at any time, but for the moment at least, they'd follow where she led.

For the time being, the rain had dwindled to a drizzle. Bareris supposed that was good. It wouldn't wash the pigment off his face or the faces of his companions.

Unfortunately, his garments were already soaked, and a letup in the downpour couldn't stop him feeling cold nor exhausted. The days and nights of flying and fighting almost without sleep had taken their toll. He crooned a restorative charm under his breath, and a tingle of vitality and alertness thrilled along his nerves.

Off to the north of the enemy encampment, light flashed, dazzling in the night. Aoth and Brightwing had swooped in to cast their fire magic. The supply wagons were as wet as everything else, and Aoth hadn't been certain the spell would actually suffice to set them ablaze, but the wavering yellow glow persisted, proof that he'd succeeded. Horses screamed, and men clamored.

With luck, the fire had distracted everyone, even sentries. Bareris, Malark, and ten comrades, all clad in the trappings of the enemy and each with gray stain on his skin and streaks of amber phosphorescence above his eyes, jumped

up from their hiding places and sprinted toward the perimeter of the camp.

They got inside without anyone raising an alarm, and then they were just zombies shambling mindlessly about, waiting for some necromancer to command them. At least that was how it was supposed to look.

Several enemy legionnaires stood babbling and gawking in the direction of the fire. Bareris and his companions circled to take them from behind. He eased his sword from its scabbard and slid it into a warrior's back. Malark broke a man's neck with a gentle-looking thump from the heel of his hand.

Somebody saw and yelled a warning. Northerners scurried to grab their weapons and shields. Bareris and his comrades slaughtered several more, then it was time to go. Their disguises wouldn't bear scrutiny for long, nor could they hope to stand against all the foes within easy reach of them. They cut their way clear and fled back into the night toward the spot where their griffons—and Malark's flying horse—waited to bear them to safety.

The loss of supplies should hinder the enemy a little. The confusion and dismay arising from the perception that some of their own undead warriors had rebelled might flummox them yet a little more. Anything to delay the advance for even another dozen heartbeats.

For one terrifying instant, Aoth dreamed he'd fallen from Brightwing's back, then woke to find it so. Fortunately, however, in reality, he hadn't been riding her across the sky but using her for a pillow, and she'd dumped his head and shoulders onto the cold, wet ground when she sprang to her feet. Now she stood staring into the trees and the darkness like a hound on a point.

Stiff, sore, and grainy-eyed, Aoth grabbed his lance and clambered upright. "What is it?"

"I don't know," the griffon replied. "Something terrible."

A shadow appeared between two oaks. "That's rather harsh."

Aoth borrowed Brightwing's eyes so he too could see in the dark, and the murky figure became a gaunt, dark-eyed man. The newcomer walked with a straight, unadorned ebony staff, and the fingers peeking from the sleeves of his wizard's robes were shriveled and flaking.

For a heartbeat, Aoth could only stand and stare, frozen by the certainty his life had come to an end. Then he started to level

his spear and drew breath to chant. He was a warrior and could at least go down fighting.

"Don't!" Brightwing screeched. "He isn't attacking!"

Szass Tam smiled. "Your familiar has good instincts, Captain Fezim. At the risk of sounding immodest, I'm . . . formidable. When I kill with my own hands, the victim tends to be a fellow archmage, a demigod, or a whole army. Anything less is scarcely worth the bother, which is not to suggest that your brave and resourceful company doesn't merit some sort of attention."

Aoth swallowed. "I don't understand."

"I'd like a parley with you and your fellow officers." Szass Tam gestured toward the heart of the grove, where the exhausted griffon riders had camped in the evidently vain hope the trees would conceal them from hostile eyes. His sleeve slipped down toward his wrist, revealing more of his withered hand. "Will you grant me safe conduct?"

"Yes," said Aoth.

He felt as if he were still mired in a dream, and it was somehow impossible to say anything else. He led Szass Tam toward his slumbering, snoring comrades. Brightwing followed, positioning herself behind the lich so she could pounce on him if it became necessary to protect her master, even though Aoth could feel she shared his conviction that Szass Tam could crush them like ants whenever he chose.

Szass Tam surveyed the sleeping men and griffons. "Do you want to wake them or should I?"

"I'll do it," Aoth replied. "Get up, everyone!" The mundane



quality of the words made the moment feel that much more unreal.

Men groaned and rolled over, rubbed their eyes and threw off their covers, then faltered as Aoth had done when they saw who'd tracked them down. Rather, all but one of them did. Bareris leaped up, drew his sword, and sprang, all in a single blur of

motion. Aoth lunged to interpose himself between the bard and Szass Tam but saw he wouldn't make it in time.

Bareris's sword flashed at the necromancer's head, and Szass Tam caught it in his hand. The enchanted weapon should have cut the skeletal fingers off, but instead, Aoth saw some sort of malignancy flash up the blade. The sword shattered, and Bareris crumpled.

Sword in hand, vaguely resembling Aoth at this particular moment, Mirror streaked at the lich. Szass Tam simply looked at the ghost, and Mirror froze into a statue of shimmer and murk.

Warriors snatched up their weapons, and griffons gathered themselves to spring. They were all afraid of Szass Tam, but now that a fight had broken out, none intended to stand idle while the lich struck down their comrades. Nor, for that matter, did Aoth. He charged his lance with power.

Szass Tam flourished his staff. Patterns of rainbow-colored light shimmered into existence around his body, then flowed into another configuration, and another after that. The ongoing process was fascinating, so much so that despite the urgencies of the moment, Aoth could only stand and stare. No doubt his comrades felt the same compulsion.

"I entered your camp under sign of truce," Szass Tam said, "and this swordsman and the ghost had no right to attack me. Even so, I've done them no permanent harm. Now will you grant me the parley I seek, or should I smite you all while you stand helpless?"

It was difficult even to think, let alone talk, while transfixed by the shifting lights, but Aoth managed to force the words

out. "You can have your talk. No one else will raise his hand to you."

"Good," said the necromancer, and his halo faded away. "Now, who are your fellow officers?" The folk in question stepped forward, some only after a moment's hesitation. Szass

Tam gestured to a patch of clear ground a few yards away. "It looks as if we have room to sit and talk over there. Shall we?"

The officers exchanged looks then moved in the direction the zulkir had indicated. Aoth surmised that the situation felt as surreal and impossible to control to them as it did to him. He started after them.

"Help me over there," Bareris croaked.

Aoth snorted. "You already had your chance to be stupid."

"If you gave Szass Tam a truce, I was wrong to break it, and I'm sorry, but I have to hear what he has to say."

"Don't make me regret it." Aoth hauled Bareris to his feet, draped the bard's arm across his shoulders, and essentially carried him to the clear spot. As far as he could see, Bareris didn't have any actual wounds. Szass Tam had simply burned away his strength.

The necromancer smiled sardonically as Aoth set Bareris back down on the ground. "I trust the inclusion of this gentleman won't prevent us from enjoying a civil conversation."

"He'll behave himself," said Aoth. He paused, waiting for somebody senior to himself to assume the role of chief spokesman for the Griffon Legion, then he realized no one else intended to put himself forward. "What is it you want to say to us, Your Omnipotence?"

"I suppose," the lich replied, sitting cross-legged on the grass like any ordinary person, "I should begin by congratulating you. Your campaign of harassment slowed my army sufficiently to achieve your purpose."

Despite his fear of the lich, Aoth felt a pang of satisfaction.

"So you won't take Bezantur without a hard fight."

"Alas," said Szass Tam, "I won't take it at all, at least not this month nor the next. My fellow zulkirs have a sizable force maneuvering to intercept me, and they're reportedly willing to commit their own persons to the battle. I'd have to fight them with the Lapendrar at my back, hindering my retreat if I should

need to make one, and even if I won, Samas Kul has Bezantur ready to resist a siege. All things considered, my tharchions and I believe the superior strategy is to withdraw." "Then we won," said Malark.

Of them all, he seemed most at ease in the lich's presence, perhaps because, serving as Dmitra Flass's lieutenant, he'd seen the creature often. Or maybe it was simply because few things seemed to daunt or even surprise him.

"In a sense," said Szass Tam, "but it's time to consider what you've won. By balking me, you've simply condemned Thay to a long war instead of a short one, a protracted struggle as destructive as only the wizardry of archmages can devise. That's of little practical consequence to me. I'll still win in the end, and immortal as I am, I'll have all the time I need to rebuild. But I would have preferred to spare humbler folk the miseries that now await them."

Aoth shrugged. "I don't know about any of that. I just know we had to follow our orders and do our duty."

"Why," asked Szass Tam, "do you believe your duty lies with the other zulkirs instead of me?"

"That," said Malark, smiling, "is a good question, Your Omnipotence, for obviously, nothing you've done is illegal, treasonous, or wrong. It can't be, because a zulkir's will is itself the definition of what's proper."

"As I recall," Szass Tam said, "you hail from the Moonsea. Perhaps it amuses you to mock our Thayan way of thinking."

"By no means," said Malark. "I simply meant to convey that I follow your logic. I recognize your authority is as legitimate as the council's, and the choice between you is essentially

an arbitrary one."

"Then why not join me," said the lich, "and undo a portion of the harm you've caused? You could. You could strike a crippling blow before the council realizes you've switched sides, and

afterward I'll treat you well. You'll hold high honors in the Thay to come, whereas if you cleave to your present course, you'll only reap disaster and defeat."

"That may be," said Malark. "I certainly wouldn't wager against you, Your Omnipotence, but even knowing the decision's not particularly sensible, I prefer to oppose you."

Szass Tam cocked his head. "Why?"

"Without intending any insult, I have to confess the undead repulse me. Everything should live and die in its season, so I'm not partial to the idea of a lich king, and likewise not averse to the idea of this long war you promise. It promises to be quite a spectacle."

"I'm against you, too," said Aoth, though the words made him feel as if he were slipping his neck into a noose. "I swore my oath to Nymia Focar, so if she stands with the council, so do I." He hesitated. "Actually, there's more to it than that. I saw what your undead raiders did in Pyarados to the 'humbler folk' you say you'd like to spare. I saw the torches explode in the hands of the priests who trusted you, and it all just sticks in my craw a little."

"I regret those deaths," said Szass Tam, "but they were necessary to further a greater good."

"What 'greater good?'" Aoth demanded. "You already ruled Thay, or near enough. The other zulkirs followed your lead more often than not. Why must you wear an actual crown even if it brings ruin on the land?"

Szass Tam hesitated. "It's a little complicated."

"Not for me," Bareris gritted. "Your servants destroyed the woman I loved and hundreds of innocents like her. You made yourself the enemy of your own people, and we'd all be crazy to give you our trust or fealty ever again."

"You gentlemen disappoint me," said the lich. "Is there none among you with any breadth or clarity of thought? Does it truly matter if a few peasants perished a day or a decade early? Everyone suffers and dies in the end, and the world rolls on just the same without him. That's the sad, shabby way of things as they are." He looked at Bareris. "In a year or two, you'll forget all about this lass you think you adored."

"You're wrong," said Bareris. "I'll never forget her, and I'll make sure you don't, either."

Szass Tam looked around the circle of captains. "I'll ask once more: Are you all of one mind? Does no one believe the Griffon Legion ought to side with the eldest and most powerful zulkir? The wizard whom, in your private thoughts, you already considered the one true master of Thay?"

Apparently no one did. Probably more than one of them questioned the wisdom of his choice, but awed and frightened by the lich, they'd kept mum while Aoth, Malark, and Bareris presented a united front, and now, perhaps, it was easier to remain silent than dissent.

"So be it then. Just don't say I didn't give you a chance."

Szass Tam rose, and Aoth tensed. Truce or no, it wouldn't astonish him if the necromancer, his offer spurned, lashed out with some terrible spell.

Instead he simply nodded goodnight and turned his back to them as if they were trusted friends then strolled toward the perimeter of the camp.

"Your Omnipotence!" Malark called.

Szass Tam glanced back around. "Yes?"

"May I ask one question?"

"Go ahead, though I don't promise an answer you'll understand."

"Tell us why you killed Druxus Rhym."

"How astute of you to wonder. Suffice it to say, I spoke of necessary sacrifices, and poor Druxus's was the most vital and regrettable of all." Szass Tam took another step, and then,

abruptly, he was gone, vanished between one instant and the next.

Aoth realized he was holding his breath and let it out. "That was ... interesting. What did we just do?"

Malark grinned. "Signed our own death warrants, probably."

"I wish I believed you were wrong." Aoth turned to the other officers. "Get the men moving. We have to clear out. Maybe Szass Tam didn't feel like dirtying his own hands slaughtering us, but now that he knows where we are, he could still send wraiths and skin kites down on our heads."

epilogue

2 Flamerule, the Year of Risen Elfkin

Night after night, the bats ranged this way and that, attacking scaly little kobolds, shaggy mountain sheep, and whatever other prey they could find. Gradually, the blood replenished their strength.

The one direction they didn't want to fly was north. They couldn't remember precisely why, but they had a sense that if they traveled in that direction, something fundamental would change and existence would become abhorrent.

Yet over time, they did drift north. They simply couldn't help it.

At last they reached the wide round shaft plunging deep into the earth. They realized they'd seen it before, and the entity floating above the rim of the well also. He looked like a huge, malformed fetus, and impossible as it seemed, he was even more grotesque than formerly. His eyes were more ill-matched, with one approximately human and the other globular and white.

The same was true of his hands. One remained a puny, rotting thing, but its mate was now enormous, ink black, and possessed of long talons. A ring of sutures revealed that someone had stitched it on.

The bats made one final effort to flee but only in their thoughts. Their will was so thoroughly constrained that even as they struggled, they swooped to the rim of the well,

swirled together, and became a single being.

With unity came memory, and Tammith realized who and what she was. Anguish rose inside her.

"Daughter!" Xingax crowed. "This is wonderful! I was certain I'd lost you, but then I felt you returning to me."

She yearned to attack him, yearned, too, to put an end to herself and knew she could do neither.

"You must tell me," said Xingax, "how did you survive?"

"He cut me apart," she said dully. Bareris had, her love, and had been right to do it. "It was horrible, but it didn't kill me, and somehow I turned the pieces into bats and flew inside a house. I made it just before the sunlight came."

Xingax smiled. "I told you you're special."

"I'm vile!" she spat. "You changed me to fight in an army, and we lost. The other creatures died. Let me die too."

He pouted. "I'd hoped that by now you would have put such foolish notions behind you. Our master didn't lose his whole army, just a fraction of it, and of course you'll continue to serve with the host that remains. I predict that in time you'll rise to be one of its greatest champions. Now come below. You can have your pick of the slaves, and that will make you feel better."

Unclean